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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

No. 15

VALLEY OF WILD HORSES By ZANE GREY (MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)

I'm going to kill you Dick Hardman.

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

No. 15

NOVEL (magazine abridgment)

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This Month's Magazine Abridgment

HERE IS THE EXCITING AND COLORFUL STORY *of a stalwart youth who grows to manhood on the open ranges of the great Southwest. The vast lonelinesses, the awesome grandeur, the character-molding challenge of that enchanted country are all present in Zane Grey's saga of Panhandle Smith, range rider extraordinary.*

As a schoolboy, Pan Smith was constantly pitted against the older and bigger Dick Hardman, one of the reasons for their rivalry being pretty little Lucy Blake. After years of wandering on the part of Pan have intervened, and he has ably served his six-gun apprenticeship and won a wide reputation as a lead thrower of peerless speed and accuracy, he again finds himself fighting Dick Hardman. Now a dissolute wastrel, Dick is threatening the happiness of a grown-up, lovelier Lucy Blake, while his father, grasping and unprincipled Jard Hardman, moves to ruin Pan's father and seize control of the boom town of Marco. The Hardmans have the backing of Matthews, the gunman who has brazenly made himself Marco's "lawman."

Pan is sided by his dad, rawhide-tough from years of adversity, and by hard-drinking, granite-loyal Blinky Moran, a daring wild-horse hunter. Bidding desperately for a stake, Pan'e outfit stages a gigantic wild-horse hunt, to find themselves challenged by the Hardmans for possession of their hard-won catch. But the final showdown comes when Lucy, deceived and despairing, prepares to leave on a wedding trip with Pan's hated rival, Dick Hardman. Then grim death looms as the stark arbiter of three peoples destinies as the premier storyteller of the romantic West brings an absorbing tale to a smashing climax.

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VALLEY OF WILD HORSES

By ZANE GREY

CHAPTER ONE

Range Kid

THE Panhandle was a lonely purple range land, unfenced and windswept. Bill Smith, cattleman, threw up a cabin and looked at the future with hopeful eyes. One day while plowing almost out of sight of his little home—which that morning he had left apprehensively owing to an impending event—he espied his wife Margaret coming along the edge of the plowed field. She had brought his lunch, despite his order to the contrary.

Bill strode toward her. Presently she halted wearily and sat down where the dark rich overturned earth met the line of bleached grass. Bill meant to scold Margaret for bringing his lunch, but it developed she had brought him something more. A son!

This boy was born on the fragrant fresh soil, out on the open prairie, under the steely sun and the cool wind from off the Llano Estacado. Bill often related that the youngster arrived squalling and showed that his lung capacity fitted his unusual size. Despite the mother's protestations, Bill insisted on calling the lad Panhandle.

Panhandle's first memory was of climbing into the big cupboard in the cabin, falling out upon his head and getting blood all over his white dress. His next adventurous experience was that of chewing tobacco he found in his father's coat. This made him very sick.

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Another day Panhandle manifested a growing tendency toward self-assertion. He ran away from home. Did the dim desert call to the child? His parents had often seen him stand gazing into the purple distance. But Panhandle on this runaway occasion fell asleep on the dry grassy bottom of an irrigation ditch. Father and mother and the farm hands ran hither and thither in wild search for him.

No one, however, found him. In the haste of the search someone left his work at the irrigation dam, and the water running down rudely awoke the child out of his dreams. Wet and bedraggled, squalling at the top of his lungs, Panhandle trudged back home to the relief of a distracted mother.

A year later Bill Smith sold his farm and moved farther west in Texas, where he took up a homestead, and divided his time between that and work on a big irrigating canal which was being constructed.

Panhandle now lived on a ranch and it was far lonelier than his first home, because his father was away so much of the time. At first the nearest neighbor was Panhandle's uncle, who lived two long prairie miles away. Panhandle undoubtedly had an adventuring soul. One day he discovered that a skunk had dug a hole under the front porch and had given birth to her kittens there. Panhandle was not afraid of them, and neither hurt nor frightened them. After a time he made playmates of them, and was one day hugely enjoying himself with them when his mother found him. She was frightened, enraged, and horrified all at once. She entreated Panhandle to let the dirty little skunks alone. Panhandle would promise and then forget. His mother punished him, all to no avail. Then she adopted harsher measures.

Homesteaders had located near by and Mrs. Smith called on them, in the hope that she could hire a cowboy or ranch hand to come over and destroy the skunks. It chanced there was no one but a Mrs. Hardman and her only boy, Dick. He was seven years old, large for his age, a bold handsome lad with red hair. Mrs. Smith made a bargain with Dick, and led him back with her.

Here Panhandle took violent exception to having his pets killed or routed out by this boy he had never before seen. He did not like his looks anyway. But Dick paid little heed to Panhandle, except once when Mrs. Smith went into the house, and then he knocked Panhandle down. For once Panhandle did not squall. He got up, round-eyed, pale, with his hands clenched. He never said a word.

Dick tore a hole in the little wall of rocks that supported the porch, and with a lighted torch on a stick he wormed his way in to rout out the skunks.

Panhandle suddenly was thrilled and frightened by a bellowing from Dick, who came hurriedly backing out of the hole. He fetched an odor with him that nearly suffocated Panhandle, so strange and terrible was it. Dick's eyes were shut. For the time being he had been blinded. He bounced around like a chicken with its head cut off, bawling wildly.

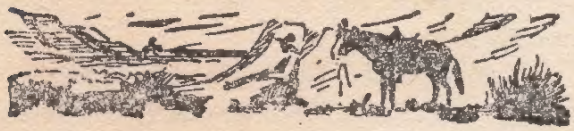
What had happened Panhandle did not know, but it certainly suited him. "Goody! Goody!" he shouted, holding his nose.

Then Panhandle saw smoke issuing from the hole under the porch. The mother skunk and her kittens scampered

out into the weeds. He heard the crackle of flames. That boy had dropped his torch under the porch. Screaming, Panhandle ran to alarm his mother. But it was too late. There were no men near at hand, so nothing could be done. Panhandle stood crying beside his mother, watching their little home burn to the ground.

They walked to the uncle's house and spent the night there. Soon another home was under construction on the same site. It was more of a shack than a house, for building materials were scarce, and the near approach of winter made hasty construction imperative. Winter came soon, and Panhandle and his mother were alone. Bill Smith came home but seldom. That fall the valley had been overrun with homesteaders, "nesters," they were called, and these newcomers passed by often from the town drunk and rough.

Panhandle used to lie awake a good deal. During these lonely hours the moan of the prairie wind, the mourn of wolves and yelp of coyotes became part of his existence. He understood why his mother barred and blocked the one door, placed the ax by the bed and the gun under her pillow. Even then he longed for the time when he would be big enough to protect her.



At last the long winter ended. With spring came the gales of wind which were terrible in their violence. Many a night Panhandle lay awake, shrinking beside his mother, fearing the shack would blow away over their heads.

As spring advanced, a new and fascinating game came into Panhandle's life: to sit at the one little window and watch the cowboys ride by. How he came to worship them! They were on their way to the spring roundups. Panhandle would strain his eyes to get a first glimpse of them, to count the shaggy prancing horses, the lithe supple riders with their great sombreros, their bright scarfs, guns and chaps, and boots and spurs. Their lassos! How they fascinated Panhandle!

His mother, discovering his interest, made him a little *reata* and taught him how to throw it, how to make loops and knots. These were full days for the lad, rousing in him wonder and awe, eagerness and fear—strange longings for he knew not what.

Then one day his father brought home a black pony with three white feet and a white spot on his face. Panhandle was in rapture. For him! It developed that his mother would not let him ride the pony except when she led it. This roused as great a grief as possession was joy. A beautiful little pony he could not ride!

One day he stole Curly, and led him out of sight behind the barn, and mounting him rode down to the spring. Curly felt the spirit of that occasion. After drinking at the spring he broke into a lope. Panhandle stuck on somehow and turned the pony toward the house. Curly loped faster. Panhandle bounced up and down. Squealing with delight, he twisted his hands in the flowing mane and held on. At the top of the hill his joy became superseded by fear.

Curly kept on loping down the hill toward the house. Faster and faster! Panhandle bounced higher and higher, up on his neck, back on his haunches, until suddenly his hold broke and he

was thrown. Down he went with a thud. It jarred him so he could hardly get up, and he reeled dizzily. There stood his mother, white of face, reproachful of eye.

"Oh, mama—I ain't hurt!" he cried.

Bill Smith was approached about this.

"Wal, wife, let the boy ride," he replied. "He's nervy. I named him well. He'll make a great cowboy. Panhandle Smith. Pan, for short!"

Pan heard that and his heart beat high. How he loved his dad then! "Cowboy" meant one of the great riders of the range. He would be one. Thereafter he lived on the back of Curly. He learned to ride, to stick on like a burr, to keep his seat on the bare back of the pony.

One day coming to a level stretch of ground Pan urged Curly to his topmost speed. The motion exhilarated him, controlling the pony awoke and fixed some strange feeling in him. He was a cowboy. Suddenly Curly put a speeding foot into a prairie-dog hole.

Pan felt himself jerked loose and shot through the air. He struck the ground and all went black. When he came to, he found he had plowed the soft earth with his face, skinned nose and chin, but was not badly hurt. That was his first great spill. It sobered him. Curly waited for him a little way farther on and he was lame. Pan knew he could not hide the evidences of his rashness, so he decided to tell the truth. He encountered his father at the barn.

"Say, you bloody cowpuncher," demanded his parent, "did he pitch with you?"

"No, Dad," replied Pan, with effort. "I runned him fast."

"Ah-huh, so I see," went on the father; and after a searching look over the boy he fell to examining the pony.

Pan, emboldened by what his father had called him, went straight to his mother. She screamed at sight of him, and that struck Pan to the heart.

"Aw, mama, it ain't nuthin'. I'm just a bloody cowpuncher."

Pan was not quite six years old when he rode to his first roundup. His glory in the experience was marred by shame because he had to appear before all these cowboys without a saddle on his horse.

"Wal, heah comes the Ridin' Kid from Loco Range," said one with a smile on his shining red face.

"Sonny, yo're forkin' a grand hoss, but you forgot to saddle him," remarked another, with a twinkle of gray eyes.

"Fellers, this heah is Panhandle Smith, kid of the homesteader, over by the river. I heerd Pan's a trick bareback rider."

These genial, fiery young men crowded round Pan, proving that there never was a cowboy who did not like youngsters.

"Say, kid, I'll swap saddles with you," spoke up the one who had first addressed him.

Pan's heart was palpitating. They were making fun of him. Tears were not far from his eyes.

"Young feller, I'll bet this nag of yourn can't run fast enough to ketch cold," spoke up another.

"I'll bet he kin," added a third.

"Pan, do this to them," put in the cowboy who appeared to know him, and he placed his thumb to his nose and twiddled his fingers. "Do that, Pan That'll shore shut them up."

Pan found himself impelled to do as he was bidden, which action raised a

howl of mirth from the cowboys. And so at that early age Panhandle Smith was initiated into the hilarity and trickery and spirit common to these carefree riders of the ranges.

When the roundup began he found that he was far from forgotten.

"Come on, Pan," shouted one. "Ride in heah an' help me. Turn 'em back, kid."

Pan rode like the wind, breathless and radiant.

Then another rider would yell to him, "Charge him, cowboy. Fetch him back."

And Pan, scarcely knowing what he was doing, saw with wild eyes how the yearling or calf would seem to be driven by him. There was always a cowboy near him, riding fast, yet close, yelling to him, making him a part of the roundup.

At the noon hour an older man, no doubt the rancher who owned the cattle, called off the work. A lusty voice yelled, "Come an' git it!"

The rancher, espying Pan, rode over to him and said, "Stranger, did you fetch your chuck with you?"

"No—sir," faltered Pan. "My mama—said for me to hurry back."

"Wal, you stay an' eat with me," replied the man kindly. "Shore them varmints might stampede an' we'd need you powerful bad."

Pan sat next to this big black-eyed man, in the circle of hungry cowboys. They made no more fun of Pan. He was one of them. Hard indeed was it for him to sit cross-legged, after the fashion of cowboys, with a steady plate upon his knees. But he had no trouble disposing of the juicy beefsteak and boiled potatoes and beans and hot biscuits that Tex, the boss, piled upon his plate.

After dinner the cowboys resumed work.

"Stand heah by the fire, kid," said Tex.

Then Pan saw a calf being dragged across the ground. A mounted cowboy held the rope. "The brand!" he yelled.

Pan stood there trembling while one of the flankers went down the tight rope to catch the bawling, leaping calf. Its eyes stood out, it foamed at the mouth. The flanker threw it over his leg on its back with feet sticking up. A brander with white iron leaped close. The calf bellowed. There was a sizzling of hair, a white smoke, the odor of burned hide, all of which sickened Pan.

Then one of the cowboys came to him. "Reckon thet's yore mammy come for you."

He lifted Pan up on Curly and led the pony out in the open where Pan espied his mother, eager and anxious with her big dark eyes strained.

"Beg pardon, lady," spoke up the cowboy, touching his sombrero. "It's our fault yore boy stayed so long. We're sorry if you worried. Please don't blame him. He's shore a game kid an' will make a grand cowboy someday."

Chapter Two

Pan Smith, Cowboy

So this was how Panhandle Smith, at the mature age of five, received the stimulus that set the current of his life in one strong channel. He called himself "Tex." He adopted Tex's way of walking, riding, talking. And all the hours of daylight, outdoors or in-

doors, he played roundup. At night his dreams were full of cowboys, chuck wagons, pitching horses, and bawling steers.

Every new sight of a cowpuncher on a horse intensified this impression in Pan's mind, stamped the future more vividly on his heart. It was what he had been born to.

One by one pioneers came in their covered wagons to this promising range and took up homesteads of one hundred and sixty acres each. Jim Blake, the latest of these incoming settlers, had chosen a site down in a deep swale that Pan always crossed when he went to visit his uncle. It was a pretty place, with grass and cottonwoods, and a thin stream of water, a lonesome and hidden spot.

Pan met Jim one day and rode with him. He was a young man, pleasant and jolly, a farmer and would-be rancher, without any of the signs of cowboy about him. Pan thought this a great detriment, but he managed to like Jim and loftily acquainted him with his achievements on Curly.

One day Pan saw Jim's wife, a pretty blond girl, strong and healthy and rosy-cheeked. Her sleeves were rolled up showing round bare arms. Her smile won Pan, yet he was too shy to take the cookies she offered.

Autumn days came, dull and gray, with cold wind sweeping the plain. Another winter was coming. Pan hated the thought. Snow, ice, piercing winds would prevent him from riding Curly.

His father and mother wanted him to go with them to the settlement one Saturday. They were taking the wagon in for winter supplies. Pan preferred to stay with Curly. His mother demurred, but his father said he might remain at home.

"Pan, you can ride over to Uncle George's with some things. But be careful not to get caught in a storm."

Thus it came about that Pan found himself alone for the first time in his life, master of himself, free to act as he chose. And he did not choose to go at once to Uncle George's. So what with one and another of his important cowboy tasks the hours flew and it was late before he got started across the prairie toward his uncle's homestead.

Pan never needed an excuse to ride fast, but now he had one that justified him. The two miles would not take long. He would have to hurry back, for indeed it looked as if a storm were sweeping down from the black peaks.

The cold wind stung his face and made his eyes water. Curly loped at his easy swift stride over the well-trodden trail. There was no sun. All the west was draped in drab clouds Soon Pan was riding down into the swale where Blake lived. The cottonwoods were almost bare.

Once across the swale he put his pony to a gallop and soon reached Uncle George's homestead. No one at home! The horse and wagon were gone. Pan left his package and turned back.

As he trotted past the Blake gate Pan heard a faint call. Reining in Curly, he listened and looked. Blake's cabin stood back out of sight among the cottonwoods. The barn, however, with its low open-sided shed, stood just inside the gate. The cows had been brought in for milking. A lusty calf was trying to steal milk from its mother. Chickens were going to roost.

Pan was about to ride on by when suddenly he again caught a strange cry that appeared to come from the

barn or shed. It excited rather than frightened him. Sliding off Curly, he pushed open the big board gate and ran in.

Under the open shed he found Mrs. Blake lying on some hay which evidently she had just pulled down from the loft. When she saw Pan her pale convulsed face changed somehow. "Oh—thank God!" she cried.

"Are you hurted?" asked Pan in hurried sympathy. "Did you fall out of the haymow?"

"No, but I'm in terrible pain."

"Aw—you're sick?"

"Yes. And I'm alone. Will you please—go for your mother?"

"Mama an' Daddy went to town," replied Pan in distress. "An' nobody's home at Uncle George's."

"Then you must be a brave little man and help me."

Bill Smith, hurrying homeward with his wife and Jim Blake, were belated by the storm. It was midnight when they arrived at Bill's house. They found Curly with bridle hanging, standing in the snow beside the barn. Mrs. Smith was distracted. Bill and Jim, though worried, did not fear the worst. But with lanterns they set out upon the tracks Curly had left in the snow. Bill's wife would not remain behind.

Soon they arrived at Blake's homestead, and found Pan wide awake, huddled beside the cow, true to the trust that had been given him. Mrs. Blake was not in bad condition, considering the circumstances, nor was the baby. It was a girl, whom Jim named Lucy after his wife.

The men carried the mother and her babe up to the house, while Mrs. Smith followed with the now sleepy Pan. They built fires in the open grate, and in the kitchen stove, and left Mrs. Smith to attend to the mother. Both women heard the men talking. But Pan never heard, for he had been put to bed in a corner, rolled in blankets.

"Doggone my hide!" exclaimed Bill. "Never seen the beat of that kid of mine!"

"Mebbe Pan saved both their lives, God bless him," replied Blake with emotion.

"*Quien sabe?* It might be. Wal, strange things happen. Jim, that kid of mine was born right out on the plowed field. An' here comes your kid—born in the cowshed on the hay!"

"Wal, Pan an' Lucy couldn't have a better birthright. It ought to settle them two kids for life."

"You mean grow up an' marry some day? Now that would be fine. Shake on it, Jim."

Pan, asleep in the corner of the other room, and Lucy, wailing at her mother's breast, were pledged to each other by their fathers.

The winter passed for Pan much as had the preceding one.

"When will Lucy be big enough to play with me?" he often asked. The strange little baby girl had never passed from his mind, though he had never seen her. She seemed to form the third link in his memory of the forging of his life. Curly—the cowboys—and Lucy! Those three events stood out above the blur of the past.

At last the snow melted, the prairie took on a sheen of green, the trees burst into bud, and birds returned to sing once more. Then there came the fourth epoch in Pan's life. His father brought him a saddle. It was far from new, of Mexican make, covered with rawhide, and had an enormous shiny

horn. Pan loved it almost as much as he loved Curly.

The fifth, and surely the greatest event in Pan's rapidly developing career, though he did not know it then, was when his mother took him over to see Lucy Blake. Pan's first sight of Lucy was when she crawled over the floor to get to him. How vastly different she really was from the picture he recalled of a moving bundle wrapped in a towel! She was quite big and very wonderful. Her feet and legs were chubby. She had tiny pink hands. Her face was like a wild rose dotted with two violets for eyes. And her hair was spun gold. Marvelous as were all these things they were as nothing to the light of her smile.

Pan's shyness vanished, and he sat on the floor to play with her. He produced little chips and pebbles, and stones, with which he played roundup.

Every Sunday that summer the Smiths visited the Blakes. They became fast friends. Bill and Jim discussed the cattle business. The mothers sewed and talked hopefully of the future. Pan never missed one of these Sunday visits, and the time came when he rode over on his own account. Lucy was the most satisfactory cowgirl in all the world. She crawled after him and toddled after him with unfailing worship. The grown folks looked on and smiled.

Meanwhile the months passed, the number of homesteaders increased. When winter came some of the homesteaders, including Pan and his mother, moved into Littleton so the children could go to school.

Pan's first teacher was Emma Jones. He liked her immediately. Pan was not used to strangers. The men in the streets, the grown boys all bothered him. Cowboys were scarce, and that was a great disappointment to Pan.

It developed that Pan was left-handed. Now Miss Jones considered it wrong for anyone to write with his left hand so she tied Pan's fast to the desk, and made him practice letters with his right. What a dreary, unprofitable time Pan had of it! He wanted Curly and the prairie. He would rather be with Lucy. Most of all he wanted the cowboys.

Dick Hardman came again into Pan's life, fatefully, inevitably, as if childhood days, school days, days of youth and manhood had been inextricably planned before they were born. Dick was in a higher grade and made the fact known to Pan. He had grown into a large boy, handsomer, bolder, with a mop of red hair that shone like a flame. He called Pan "the little skunk tamer," and incited other boys to ridicule. So the buried resentment in Pan's depths smoldered and burst into blaze again, and found fuel to burn it into hate. He told his mother what Dick had got the boys to call him. Then he was indeed surprised to see his sweet soft-eyed mother give way to quick-flashing passion. Somehow this leap of her temper strengthened Pan in his resentment.

Then the endless school days were over for a while. Summer had come. Pan moved back to the beloved homestead, to Curly and Lucy. Only she had changed. She could stand at his knee and call him Tex. He resumed his old games with her, and in time graduated her to a seat on the back of Curly.

Another uncle had moved into the country. Pan now had a second place to ride to, farther away, over a wilder bit of range, and much to his liking. He saw cowboys every time he rode there.

One day while Pan was at this new uncle's, a dreadful thing happened—his first real tragedy. Some cowboy left the slide door of the granary open. Curly got in there at the wheat. Before it became known he ate enormously and then drank copiously. It foundered him. It killed him.

Pan was heartbroken. He could not be consoled. Hours he spent crying over his saddle. Not for a long time did he go to see little Lucy. His father could not afford to buy him another horse then and indeed it was a long time before he did get one.

Fall came, then winter with more school, tedious and wearing, and again spring and summer. Cowboys were plentiful now in the growing range, but Pan avoided them, ashamed and sick because he could not approach them without Curly. He never got over grieving for his pony. He played alone, or with Lucy. Lucy was growing fast now; her golden curly head seemed to spring up at him.

That autumn the homesteaders erected a schoolhouse of their own. It was scarcely three miles from Pan's home.

"Pan, can you walk it?" asked Bill Smith with his keen eye on the lad.

"Yes, Daddy—but—but—"

"Ah-huh. An' before long Lucy will be old enough to go too," added his father. "Reckon you'll take her?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Wal, you're a good boy," declared the father. "An' you won't have to walk to school. I've traded for two horses for you."

"*Two!*" screamed Pan, wild with joy. "Oh! Oh! Oh!"

In due time the new horses arrived. Their names were Pelter and Pilldarlick. Pelter was a pinto, snappy and pretty, though he had a wicked eye. Pilldarlick was small and strong, easy-gaited and gentle. Pan thought he was going to like Pelter best, although Pilldarlick was surely a cowboy name and therefore all-satisfying. It turned out, however, that Pan could not ride Pelter. He bucked Pan off every time. Pilldarlick was really much better than he looked, and soon filled the void in Pan's heart.

The first time he rode Pilldarlick to the new school marked another red-letter day in the life of Panhandle Smith, cowboy. Pan was the proud cynosure of all eyes as he rode Pilldarlick round the yard for the edification of his schoolmates. It was the happiest day of Pan's life—up until Dick Hardman arrived on a spirited little black mustang.

"Hey, where'd you git that nag?" yelled Dick, when he sighted Pan. "An' say, your saddle ain't nothin' but rawhide on a stump."

"You're a liar!" shouted Pan, fiercely tumbling off Pilldarlick.

The redheaded lad pitched out of his saddle and made for Pan.

They began to fight. Instinct was Pan's guide. He hit and scratched and kicked. But Dick, being the larger, began to get the better of the battle, and was beating Pan badly when the new teacher came out.

"Stop it," she ordered, separating the belligerents. "Only cats and dogs fight."

"So—do—cowboys!" panted Pan.

"Not nice ones. Only bad cowboys," she replied, leading Pan away.

"I'll lick you next time," yelled Dick evilly. "You stuck-up little snot!"

Chapter Three

School Days for Pan

MISS Amanda Hill, the teacher, rang the bell, calling all her scholars in, and school began once more.

Dick Hardman sat across the room from Pan and behind the teacher's back he made ugly faces at Pan and, more than that, put his nose to his thumb. Pan quick as a flash returned the compliment.

Recess came. Dick and Pan ran to the barn, out of the teacher's sight, and fell upon each other like wildcats. It did not take Dick long to give Pan the first real beating of his life. Cut lip, bloody nose, black eye, dirty face, torn blouse—these things betrayed Pan at least to Miss Hill. She kept him in after school, and instead of scolding she talked kindly. Pan came out of his sullenness, and felt love for her rouse in him. But somehow he could not promise not to fight again.

"S'pose Dick does that all over again!" expostulated Pan in despair He wanted to please and obey this sweet little woman, but there was a revolt in him. "What'll my—my daddy —say when he hears I got licked!" he sobbed.

She compromised finally by accepting Pan's willing promise not to pick a fight with Dick.

Despite the unpleasant proximity of Dick Hardman, that winter at school promised to be happy and helpful to Pan. There were three large boys, already cowboys, who attended Miss Hill's school. Pan gravitated at once to them, and to his great satisfaction they accepted him.

Later his old cowboy friend of the roundup arrived on the range with a trail herd. Their brand was an O X, a new one to Pan. He kept a record of all the brands he had seen, and practiced drawing them on paper. Moore and three of his cowboys came to board at Pan's home, and kept their string of horses there. Pan's cup was full.

The cowboys' nickname for Moore was Pug, and another fellow whose real name Pan never heard was called Slats. They taught Pan all the cowboy songs. Every night Pan listened to them sing by the fire in their bunkhouse, and many times he had to be called to do his chores.

Another of the cowboys was called Hookey. His nose resembled that of a parrot and he had the disposition of a locoed coyote, according to Pug and Slats. Hookey took a dislike to Pan, and always sought to arouse the boy's temper. These cowboys were always gone in the morning before Pan got up, but by the time he arrived home from school on Pilldarlick they were usually there.

Slats, who wanted to be a lady killer, would say, "Wal, Button, what did your schoolmarm say about me today?" And Hookey would make fun of Pilldarlick. One day Pan gave way to fury, and with flying rocks he chased Hookey into the cellar, and every time Hookey poked up his head Pan would fling a stone with menacing accuracy. That time his mother came to the rescue of the cowboy. After that Hookey bought a new saddle and gave Pan his old one. That settled hostilities. Pan had a change of heart.

One day two strange men arrived at

the Smith homestead. They had still, hard faces, intent gray eyes; they packed guns, and one of them wore a bright star on his vest. These men took Hookey away with them. The cowboys told Pan that Hookey was wanted for horse stealing. Young as Pan was he understood the enormity of that crime in the eyes of cowboys. He felt terribly hurt and betrayed.

Swiftly that winter passed. Pan had a happy growing time of it. He kept out of fights with Dick Hardman until one recess when Dick called him "teacher's pet." That inflamed Pan, as much because of the truth of it as the shame. So this time, though he had hardly picked a fight, he was the first to strike. With surprising suddenness he hit Dick square on the nose. When Dick got up howling and swearing, his face was hideous with dirt and blood. Then began a battle that dwarfed the one in the barn. Pan had grown considerably. He was quick and strong, and when once his mother's fighting blood burned in him he was as fierce as a young savage. But again Dick whipped him.

Pan thought he had ruined himself forever with Miss Amanda Hill. But to his amaze and joy he had not. Next day she kept him in after school, cried over him, kissed him, talked long and earnestly. All that Pan remembered was: "Something terrible will come of your hate for Dick Hardman if you don't root it out of your heart."

"Teacher—why don't you—talk to Dick this way?" faltered Pan.

"Because Dick is a different kind of a boy," she replied, but never explained what she meant.

Winter passed. Spring came with roundups too numerous for Pan to keep track of. And a swift happy summer sped by.

That fall a third uncle settled in the valley. He was an older brother of Pan's father, whom they called Old Uncle Ike. He was a queer old bachelor, lived alone, and did not invite friendliness. Pan was told to stay away from him. But he was only the keener to see and know Old Uncle Ike. He went boldly to make his acquaintance. He found a sad-faced, gray old man, sitting alone.

Pan said bravely, "Uncle, I'm Pan Smith, your brother Bill's boy, an' I've come to see you because I'm sure I'll like you."

He did not find the old man unfriendly, and soon they became fast friends. Every Saturday Pan rode over to Uncle Ike's place, stealing some of the time he was supposed to be spending with Lucy. The little girl pouted and cried and railed at Pan for such base desertion, but he only laughed at her. Any time he wanted he could have Lucy. She grew sweeter and more lovable as she grew older, but Pan chose the old man's stories of war and Indians in preference to Lucy's society.

Pan grew tall and supple, with promise of developing the true horseman's build. Then the spring when he was twelve years old arrived and his father consented to let him ride for wages at the roundup.

He joined a big outfit. There were over fifty cowboys, two bed wagons, two chuck wagons, and strings of horses too numerous to count. A new horse to ride twice a day! This work was as near paradise as Pan felt he had ever been. But for one circumstance, it would have been absolutely perfect—he had no boots. A fast-riding cowboy without boots!

In the heat of action, amid the whirling loop of bawling calves and cows, when the dry dust rose to stop up Pan's nostrils and cake on his hot sweaty face, when the ropes were whistling, the cowboys yelling, the brand iron sizzling, all he felt was the wild delight of it, the excitement, the constant stirring life and motion. During leisure hours, however, he was always confronted with his lack of rider's equipment.

"Say, kid, who built them top boots of yourn?" asked one cowboy.

"Shore, I'll trade spurs with you," drawled another.

"Whar's yore fur chaps there, cowboy?" queried a third.

And so it went always and forever. Nevertheless Pan loved the cowboys, and they were good to him.

His best friends were Si and Slick, both horse wranglers, whose real names Pan never learned.

That roundup was prolific of wonderful experiences. One night when a storm threatened the foreman called to the cowboys not on duty, "Talk to 'em low, boys, fer they're gettin' ready."

And when the thunder and rain burst the herd broke away with a trampling roar. Pan got soaked to the skin and lost in the rain. When he returned to camp only the cook and wagons were there. Next morning the cowboys straggled in in bunches, each driving part of the stampeded herd.

At breakfast one morning Pan heard a yell: "Ride him, cowboy?"

"Whoopee! Look at that outlaw comin' high, wide, an' handsome!"

Pan just had time to see a terribly pitching red horse come tearing into the circle of cowboys. His rider went shooting over his head to alight among them. Then what a scattering! How the cowboys reviled the poor fellow who had been thrown!

"Huh! Broke yore collar bone?" yelled one. "Why you dod-blasted son of a sea cook, he oughta hev broke yore neck!"

And Si, the horse wrangler, said, "Charlie, I reckon it's onconsiderate of you to exercise yore pet hoss on our stummicks."

One of the amazing things that happened during the winter was the elopement of Miss Amanda Hill with a cowboy.

Pan never forgot Lucy's first day of school when he rode over with her sitting astride behind him, "ringin' his neck," as a cowboy remarked. Pan had not particularly been aware of that part of the performance for he was used to having Lucy cling to him. That embarrassed him. He dropped her off rather unceremoniously at the door, and went to put his horse in the corral. She was little and he was big, which fact further bore upon his consciousness, through the giggles of the girls and gibes of the boys. But they did not make any change in his attitude toward Lucy. All winter he took her to and from school on his horse.

As Pan grew older time seemed so much shorter than when he was little. There was so much to do. And all at once he was fifteen years old. His mother gave him a party on that birthday, which was marked on his memory by the attention his boy friends paid to Lucy. He did not know exactly what to make of his resentment, nor of the queer attitude of proprietorship he had assumed over her.

He was destined to learn more about his state of mind. It happened the next day at school during the noon hour.

The pupils were eating their lunches out under the trees.

Suddenly Lucy came running up to Pan, who as usual was having a care for his horse. Her golden hair was flying, disheveled. Her big violet eyes streamed with tears.

"Pan—you go right off—and thrash Dick Hardman," she cried.

"Lucy!—What's he done?"

"He's always worrying me—when you're not around. I never told 'cause I knew you'd fight. But now he's done it. He grabbed me and kissed me! Before all the boys!"

Pan looked steadily at her tear-wet face, seeing Lucy differently. She was not a baby any more. For some strange reason beyond his understanding he was furious with her. Pushing her aside, he strode toward the group of boys leering close by.

Dick Hardman, a strapping big lad now, edged back into the crowd. Pan violently burst into it, forcing the boys back, until he confronted his adversary. On Dick's sallow face the brown freckles stood out prominently. Something in the look and advance of Pan had intimidated him. But he blustered, he snarled.

"You're a skunk," said Pan fiercely, and struck out with all his might.

One hour from that moment they were still fighting. They had fought from the grove to the schoolyard, from there down the road and back again. Bloody, ragged, black, they beat, tore, hit, bit, and clawed each other.

The teacher, wringing her hands, called upon the other boys to separate the belligerents. They had tried, but in vain, and only got kicked for their pains. The girls, most of them, screamed and cried. But not Lucy! Whitefaced and with dilated eyes she watched that struggle. At last the teacher sent some of the children for help from the nearest farmhouse.

Dick would lower his head and lunge at Pan, trying to butt him in the abdomen. Twice he had bowled Pan over, to his distinct advantage. But the crafty Pan, timing another and last attack of this kind, swung up his knee with terrific force, square into Dick's face.

Down Dick plumped, rolled over on his back, yelling loudly. Suddenly he ceased, raised up on one elbow, spat blood and something that rattled on the gravel. A tooth! His grimy hand went trembling to his blood-stained mouth. He felt of his front teeth. One was gone, others were loose. Staggering to his feet, fetching a stone with him, he glared at Pan. "I'll—kill—you!"

He flung the stone with deadly intent. But Pan dodged it and leaped at him. Dick ran hard toward the schoolhouse, stooping to snatch up stones, and turning to fling them at Pan. The yelling boys scattered, the frightened girls fled. Pan was not to be outdone at any kind of fight. He returned stone for stone, the last of which struck Dick low down in the leg. Like a crippled beast Dick shrieked and plunged into the schoolhouse, slamming shut the door. But Pan, rushing after, grabbed up a rock and flung it so powerfully that it split the door and knocked it off the hinges.

Pan rushed in to receive full in the face a long, thick teacher's ruler thrown by Dick. It knocked him flat. Picking it up Pan brandished it and charged his enemy. Dick ran along the blackboard, and jerking up one eraser after another he threw them. His aim was poor. His strength waning. His courage had gone.

Suddenly Dick made for the teacher's table. An idea, an inspiration showed in his renewed speed. Pan divined its purpose. Leaping upon the desks he endeavored to head Dick off. Too late! When Pan sprang off the last desk to the platform Dick had turned—with the teacher's long paper-knife in his hand and baleful hate in his prominent eyes.

Later, when the children outside dared to peep into the schoolroom they neither saw nor heard anything of the fighters. But fearing they were just hiding behind the benches, ready for a renewed fusillade, not one of the pupils dared go in. The teacher had hurried down the road to meet the men some of the boys had fetched.

These men were Jim Blake and Bill Smith who had been riding home from the range. When they entered the schoolroom with the teacher fearfully following, and only Lucy of all the scholars daring to come too, they found the fight was over.

Dick lay unconscious on the floor with a bloody forehead. Pan sat crouched on the platform, haggard and sullen, with face, shirt, hands all bloody.

"Ah-uh! Reckon you've been fightin' like a cowboy for shore this time," said Pan's father in his matter-of-fact way. "Stand up. Let's look at you. Jim, take a look at that lad on the floor."

While Pan painfully endeavored to get up, Blake knelt beside Dick.

"Bill, this heah rooster has had a wallop," said Blake.

"You little cowpunchin' ruffian," exploded Smith angrily, reaching a large arm for Pan. "Now then—What the hell? Boy, you've been *stabbed!*"

"Yes—Dad—he struck me—with teacher's knife," replied Pan faintly. He tottered on his feet, and his right hand was pressed tight to his left shoulder, high up, where the broken haft of the paper knife showed between his red-stained fingers.

Bill Smith's anger vanished in alarm, and something stern and grim took its place. Just then Lucy confronted him.

"Oh—please don't punish him, Mr. Smith," she burst out poignantly. "It was all my fault. I—I stuck up my nose at Dick. He said things that—that weren't nice. I slapped him. Then he grabbed me, kissed me. I ran to Pan—and—told him. Oh, that made Pan fight."

Smith looked gravely down into the white little face with the distended violet eyes.

"Wal, Lucy, I'll not punish Pan," he said slowly. "I think more of him for fightin' for you."

Chapter Four

Range Rider

THEY did not meet again during the winter. It was a hard winter. Pan left school and stayed close to home. working for his mother, and playing less than any time before.

"I heard Dick say he'd kill you someday," said one cowboy seriously. "An' take it from me, kid, he's a bad hombre."

"Ah-huh!" was all the reply Pan vouchsafed, as he walked away. He did not like to be reminded of Dick. It sent an electric spark to the deep-seated smoldering mine in his breast.

When springtime came Pan joined the roundup in earnest, for part of the cattle and outfit now belonged to his father. Out on the range the forty riders waited for the wagons. There were

five cowboys from Big Sandy in Pan's bunch and several more arrived from the Crow Roost country. Old Dutch John, a famous range character, was driving the chuck wagon. He could not talk without swearing and, if he replied to a question that needed only yes or no, he would supplement it with a string of oaths.

Next day the outfit rode the west side of Dobe Creek, rounding up perhaps a thousand cattle. Pete Blaine and Hooley roped calves while Pan helped hold up.

On the following day the riders circled Blue Lakes, where cattle swarmed. These two lakes were always dry, except during the spring; and now they were full, with green grass blanketing the range as far as eye could see.

By Monday long lines of cattle moved down to the spot chosen for the roundup. When thrown together all these cattle formed a sea of red and white, from which roared an incessant bawling. It looked impossible to separate cows and calves from the others. But dozens of fearless cowboys, riding in here and in there, soon began to cut out the cows and calves.

It was a spectacle that inspired Pan as never before. The wagons were lined up near the lake, and higher on a bench stood the "hoodlum" or bed wagon. Beyond the margin of the lake, four hundred fine saddle horses grazed and kicked and bit at one another. Beyond the saddle horses grazed the day herd of cattle. And over on the other side dinned the melee over the main herd, the incessant riding, yelling of the cowboys and the bawling of the cows.

When all the cows and calves were cut out, a rider of each outfit owning cattle on that range would go through to claim those belonging to his brand. Next the herd of bulls and steers, old cows and yearlings, would be driven back out upon the range.

Fires were started, and as there was no wood on that range, buffalo chips were used instead.

At sunset, when the branding of calves was finished, each cowboy caught a horse for night duty. Pan got one he called Old Paint.

"Say, kid," called one of the Crow Nest cowboys, "ain't you tyin' up a pretty fancy hoss fer night work?"

"Oh, I guess not," laughed Pan.

"Come heah, Blowy," called the cowboy to another. "See what I found."

A long lanky red-faced rider strode over to look at Pan's horse.

"Wal, I'll go to hell, Ben Bolt, if it ain't Ol' Calico!" he ejaculated in amaze and pleasure. "Kid, whar'd you ever git him?"

"Dad made a trade," replied Pan.

"Kid, don't ever tie that hoss to a stake pin. He's the best cow hoss I ever slung a leg over. The puncher who broke him an' teached him all he knows was my pard, long ago. An' he's daid. Kid, he'd roll over in his grave if he knowed Ol' Cal was tied to a picket pin."

"Aw, is that so?" replied Pan. "Fact is, I don't know much about him. We called him Old Paint. Haven't forked him yet. Dad got him from a lady last winter. She was trying to work him to a cart. But he balked. She said she poured some hot water on—"

"Lady, hell!" shouted the cowboy, growing redder of face. "She wasn't no lady if she treated that grand hoss that way. See heah, kid, I'll stake you to a good night hoss. Turn Ol' Cal loose, an' whenever you need to do some real

fancy separatin' jest set your frusky on Ol' Cal. Better tie to your stirrups if you're perticler aboot keepin' your seat, 'cause 'at ol' pony can sure git from under a cowhand."

"All right, I'll turn Old Calico loose," replied Pan. "And I'll remember what you said about him."

Blowy pointed out one of his horses. "Kid, screw your wood to thet jasper, an' you'll never be walkin'."

"Thanks, but I got lots of horses," said Pan.

"Aw, go on—lots of horses! Why bunkie, I got more mean horses than I can start to keep gentle. I just fetched thet one to stake my friends."

Pan saddled up the horse indicated, and found him the best he had ever mounted. That experience led to his acquaintance with Blowy. He was a ceaseless talker, hence his name, but beloved by all the outfit.

That roundup was Pan's real introduction to the raw range. When the time came for the outfit to break up, with each unit taking its own cattle, the boss said to Pan, "Come ride fer me."

Pan, flushed and pleased, mumbled his thanks, but he had to work for his father. Then he and the boy with him, Joe Crawley, bade their comrades good-by and started home with their cows and calves.

That fall Jim Blake sold his farm, and took his family to New Mexico. He had not been prospering in the valley. Pan did not get home in time to say good-by to Lucy—something that hurt in an indefinable way. She left a little note of farewell, simple and loyal, hopeful, yet somehow stultified. Not so childish as former notes! Time flew by and Lucy might be growing up.

The Hardmans had also moved away from the valley, where, none of the neighbors appeared to know. But Pan was assured of two facts concerning them: firstly that Dick had gotten into a serious shooting scrape in which he had wounded a rancher's son, and secondly that from some unknown source the Hardmans had acquired or been left some money.

Pan promptly forgot his boyhood enemy. This winter was the last that he spent at home. He rode the Limestone range that summer, fast developing all the qualities that pertained to the best riders of the day.

Upon returning home he found that his father had made unwise deals and was not getting along very well. Grasping settlers had closed in on the range. Rustlers had ridden down from the north, raiding the valley. During Pan's absence a little sister was born, which was indeed joyful news for him.

Pan decided that he could not remain idle during the winter. He could have had plenty to do at home, working without wages, but that was no longer to be thought of. So he decided to join two other adventurous cowboys who had planned to go south and in the spring come back with some of the great herds being driven north.

But Pan liked the vast ranges of the Lone Star State, and he rode there for two years, inevitably drifting into the wild free life of the cowboys. Sometimes he sent money home to his mother, but that was seldom, because he was always in debt. She wrote him regularly, which fact was the only link between him and the old home memories. Thought of Lucy returned now and then, and it seemed like a sweet melancholy dream. Never a word did he hear of her.

Spring had come again when he rode

into the Panhandle, and as luck would have it he fell in with an outfit driving cattle to Montana, a job that would take until late fall. To his chagrin stories of his wildness had preceded him. Pan was the more respected by these riders. But he feared that gossip of the southern ranges would reach his mother. He would go home that fall to reassure her that he was not one of those "bad, gun-throwing cowboys."

But late fall found him cheated of his summer's wages, without money and job, so he found a place with a rancher in Montana. He learned to hate the bleak ranges of that northern state, the piercing blasts of wind, the ice and snow. Spring saw him riding south toward his old stamping-grounds. But always he was drifting, and he did not reach home. The Cimarron, the Platte, the Arkansas ranges came to know the tracks of his horses; and after he had drifted on, to remember him as few cowboys were remembered.

At twenty years of age Panhandle Smith looked older—looked the hard life, the hard fare, the hard companionship that had been his lot as an American cowboy. He had absorbed all the virtues of that remarkable character, and most of the vices. But he had always kept aloof from women. His comrades gave many forceful and humorous reasons for his apparent fear of the sex, but they never understood him. Pan never lost the reverence for women his mother had instilled in him, nor his first and only love for Lucy Blake.

One summer night Pan was standing night-guard duty for his cowboy comrade, who was enamored of the daughter of the rancher for whom they worked. Jim was terribly in love, and closely pressed by a rival from another outfit. This night was to be the crucial one.

Pan had to laugh at his friend. He was funny, he was pathetic, so prone to be cast down one moment and the next raised aloft to the skies, according to the whim of the capricious young lady. Many times Pan had ridden and worked with a boy afflicted with a similar malady.

This night, however, Pan had been conscious of encroaching melancholy. Perhaps it was a yearning for something he did not know how to define.

The night was a sultry, oppressive one, silent except for the uneasy lowing of the herd, a rumble of thunder from the dark rolling clouds. A weird yellow moon hung just above the horizon. The range spread away dark, lonely, and wild. No wind stirred. All at once to Pan the whole world seemed empty. The open range, the solitude, the herd of cattle in his charge, the comrades asleep, the horses grazing round their pickets—these always sufficient things suddenly lost their magic potency. He divined at length that he was homesick. And he determined to quit his job and ride home.

Chapter Five

Boom Town

On his way home Panhandle Smith rode across the old Limestone range that had been the scene of his first cowboy activities. It had not changed, although the cattle were not so numerous.

Pan made camp on the rocky ford where a brook joined the Limestone. It was thirty miles to Littleton, farther

to Las Animas, and his pack horse was tired. He cooked his meager meal, unrolled his bed, and lay down under the open sky. But he could not get to sleep for long. The nearer he got home the stranger and deeper his thoughts.

Moving on next day, he kept sharp lookout among the cattle for his father's brand. But he saw no sign of it. At length, toward sunset, he concluded in surprise that his father's stock no longer ran this range. Too many homesteads and fences!

He reached Littleton at dark. It had grown to be a sizable settlement. Pan treated himself to a room at the new hotel, and after supper went out to find somebody he knew. It was Saturday night and the town was full of riders and ranchers. He expected to meet an old acquaintance any moment, but to his further surprise he did not. Finally he went to Campbell's store. John Campbell, huge of build, with his long beard and ruddy face, appeared exactly the same as when he used to give Pan a stick of candy. Campbell did not recognize him.

"Howdy, stranger, reckon you've got the best of me," he replied to Pan's question, and he sized up the tall, lithe rider with curious and appreciating eyes.

"Panhandle Smith," announced Pan, with just a little diffidence. Perhaps if he was not remembered personally he might have the good luck to be unknown in reputation.

"Wal—Pan, if 't ain't you, by gosh!" ejaculated Campbell cordially, and there was unmistakable welcome in his grip. "But no one here will ever recognize you. Say, you've sprung up. We've heerd a lot about you. Cowboy, you've seen some range life, if all the talk is true."

"You mustn't believe all you hear, Mr. Campbell," replied Pan with a smile. "I'd like to know about my dad and mother."

"Wal, haven't you heerd?"

"What?" flashed Pan, noting the other's sudden change to gravity. "It's two years and more since I got a letter from Mother."

"You ought to have come home long ago," said Campbell. "Your father lost his cattle. Old deal with Hardman that stood for years. Mebbe you never knowed about it. There are ranchers around here who swear Hardman drove sharp deals. Wal, your father sold the homestead an' left. Reckon it's been over a year."

"Where'd they go?"

"Your pa never told me, but I heerd that he hit Hardman's trail an' went to western New Mexico. Marco is the name of the place. New country up there. Gold an' silver minin', some cattle outfits goin' in, an' lately I heerd of some big wild-hoss deals on."

"Well!" exclaimed Pan, in amaze and sorrow at this news. "Why did Dad go?"

"Reckon I couldn't say fer sure. But he was sore at Hardman, an' the funny thing is he wasn't sore till some time after Hardman left these parts. Mebbe he learned somethin'. An' you can learn whatever it was if you hunt up them ranchers who once got stung by Hardman."

"Ah-uh!" muttered Pan thoughtfully. "Don't know as I care to learn. Dad will tell me. Jim Blake, now, what become of him?"

"Jim, a while back, was foreman for Hardman's outfit over in Marco."

"How do you get there?"

"Wal, it's on the old road to Californy."

Pan went to the seclusion of his room, and there in the dark, sleepless, he knew the pangs of remorse. Without realizing the flight of years. always meaning to return home, to help father, mother, little sister, to take up again with his never-forgotten Lucy—he had allowed the wild life of the range to hold him too long. Excuses were futile. Pride, neglect, love of the range and new country, new adventure had kept him from doing his duty by his parents. That hour was indeed dark and shameful for Panhandle Smith. Instead of drowning his grief in drink, as would have been natural for a cowboy, he let it work its will upon him. He deserved the pangs of self-reproach, the futile wondering, the revived memories that roused longings stronger than that which had turned him on the homeward trail.

Next day Pan sold his outfit, except the few belongings he cherished, and boarded a westbound stage. Once on the way he recovered from his brooding mood and gradually awakened to the fact that he was riding to a new country, a new adventure—the biggest of his life—in which he must make amends to his mother, and to Lucy.

New Mexico seemed strange and new. Pan knew the plains from Montana to Texas. But this was different country, with its stretches of valley, its walls red and yellow, its strange shafts of rock, its amber ranges, and far away on every horizon the dim purple and white of great peaks were magnificent.

The Mormon ranches were scattered along the few green valleys. Cattle were scarce, only a few herds dotting the endless sweeps of green sage and bleached grass. As he traveled farther westward, however, the numbers of wild horses increased until they ran into the thousands.

Horses had meant more to Pan than anything. In his wanderings he had often encountered wild horses, and had enjoyed many a chase after them. Every cowboy was a wild-horse hunter, on occasions. If he had ridden these desert ranges, he would inevitably have become permanently a hunter and lover of wild horses. Moreover, Pan did not see why there would not be vastly more money in it than in punching cows. He grew charmed with the idea.

Western New Mexico at last! Sand dunes and wastes of black lava, dry lake beds and cone-shaped extinct volcanoes, with the ragged crater mouths gaping, low ranges of yellow cedar-dotted hills, valleys of purple, and green forests on the mountain slopes—all these in endless variety were new to the cowboy of the plains. Water was conspicuous for its absence; the homesteader, that hopeful and lonely pioneer, was as scarce as streams.

One night, hours after dark, the stage rolled into Marco. Marco! How unusual the swelling of Pan's heart! The long three-week ride had ended. The stage had rolled down a main street the like of which Pan had never even imagined. It was crude, rough, garish with lights and stark board fronts of buildings, and a motley jostling crowd of men; women, too, were not wanting in the throngs

streaming up and down. Again it was Saturday night. Noise and dust filled the air. Pan pulled down his bag, and mounted the board steps of the hotel the stage driver had announced.

Contrary to his usual habit of throwing his money to the winds like most cowboys, he had exercised rigid economy on this trip. Indeed, it was the first time he had ever done such a thing. He had between four and five hundred dollars, consisting of wages he had saved and the proceeds from the sale of his horses and outfit. There was no telling in what difficulties he might find his father and what need there might be or his money. So Pan took cheap lodgings, and patronized a restaurant kept by a Chinese.

He chose a table at which sat a young man whose face and hands and clothes told of rough life in the open.

"Mind if I sit here?" he asked, indicating the vacant chair.

"Help yourself, stranger," was the reply.

"I'm sure hungry. How's the chuck here?" went on Pan.

"The Chink is a first-rate cook an' clean. Just come to town?"

"Yes," replied Pan, and after giving his order to a boy waiter he continued, "And it took a darn long ride to get here. From Texas."

"That so? Well, I come from western Kansas, just across the Texas line."

"Been here long?"

"Reckon a matter of six months."

"What's your work if you'll excuse curiosity."

"I've been workin' a minin' claim. Gold."

"Ah-huh!" replied Pan with quickened interest. "Sounds awful good to me. I never saw any gold but a few gold eagles, and they've sure been scarce enough."

Pan's frankness, combined with his appearance, always created the best of impressions upon men. His companion grinned, as if he had shared Pan's experience. "Reckon you needn't tell me you're a cowpuncher. I heard you comin' before I saw you. My name's Brown."

"Howdy, glad to meet you," replied Pan, and then with evident hesitation, "Mine is Smith."

"Panhandle Smith?" queried the other quickly.

"Why, sure," returned Pan with a laugh.

"Shake," was all the reply Brown made, except to extend a lean strong hand.

"I'm 'most as lucky as I am unlucky," said Pan warmly. "It's a small world. Now tell me, Brown, have you seen or heard anything of my dad, Bill Smith?"

"No, sorry to say. But I haven't mingled much. Been layin' pretty low, because I think I've struck a rich claim. An' it's made me cautious."

"Ah-huh. Pretty wide-open town, I'll bet. I appreciate your confidence in me."

"To tell you the truth I'm darn glad to run into someone from near home. Lord, I wish you could have brought word from my wife an' baby."

"Married, and got a kid. That's fine. Boy or girl?"

"It's a girl. I never saw her, as she was born after I left home. My wife wants to come out here, but I can't see that yet a while."

"Well, it must be tough to be separated from your family. I'm not married, but I know what a little girl means. Say, Brown, did you ever run

into a man out here named Jim Blake?"

"No."

"Or a man named Hardman? Jard Hardman?"

"Hardman! Now you're talkin', Panhandle. I should smile I have," replied Brown, with a flash of eyes.

"What's Hardman doing?" asked Pan quietly.

"Everythin', an' between you an' me, he's doin' everybody. Jard Hardman is in everythin'. Minin', ranchin', an' I've heard he's gone in for this wild-horse chasin'. That's the newest boom around Marco. But Hardman has big interests here in town. It's rumored he's back of the Yellow Mine, the biggest saloon an' gamblin'-hell in town."

"Well, I'll be doggoned," ejaculated Pan. "Things turn out funny. You can show me that place presently. Does Hardman hang out here in Marco?"

"Part of the time. He travels to Frisco, Salt Lake, an' St. Louis where he sells cattle an' horses. He has a big ranch out here in the valley, an' stays there some. His son runs the outfit."

"His son?" queried Pan, suddenly hot with a flash of memory.

"Yes, his son," declared Brown, eyeing Pan earnestly. "Reckon you must know Dick Hardman?"

"I used to—long ago," replied Pan, pondering.

"Old Hardman makes the money an' Dick blows it in," went on Brown, with something of contempt in his voice. "Dick plays, an' they say he's a rotten gambler. He drinks like a fish, too. I heard he'd fetched a girl here from Frisco."

"Ah-huh! Tell me, Brown, what's this Marco town anyway?"

"Well, it's both old an' new. That's about all, I reckon. Findin' gold an' silver out in the hills has made a boom this last year or so. That's what fetched me. The town is twice the size it was when I saw it first, an' many times more people. There's a lot of these people, riffraff, that work these minin' towns. Gamblers, sharks, claim jumpers, outlaws, adventurers, tramps, an' of course the kind of women that go along with them. A good many cow outfits make this their headquarters now. An' last, this horse tradin', an' wild-horse catchin'. Sellin' an' shippin' has attracted lots of men. Every day or so a new feller, like you, drops in from east of the Rockies. There are some big mining men investigatin' the claims. An' if good mineral is found Marco will be solid, an' not just a mushroom town."

"Any law?" inquired Pan thoughtfully.

"Not so you'd notice it much, especially when you need it," asserted Brown grimly. "Matthews is the town marshal. Self-elected so far as I could see. An' he's hand an' glove with Hardman. He's mayor, magistrate, sheriff, an' the whole caboodle, includin' the court. But there are substantial men here who sooner or later will organize an' do things. They're too darned busy now workin', gettin' on their feet."

"I savvy. I reckon you're giving me a hunch that in your private opinion Matthews isn't exactly straight where some interests are concerned. Hardman's, for instance."

"You got me," replied Brown soberly. "But please regard that as my confidential opinion. I couldn't prove it. This town hasn't grown up to political corruption an' graft. But it's headed that way."

"Well, I was lucky to run into you," said Pan with satisfaction. "I'll tell you why some other time. I'm pretty sure

to stick here. Now let's go out and see the town, especially the Yellow Mine."

Pan had not strolled the length of the main street before he realized that there was an atmosphere here strangely unfamiliar to him. Yet he had visited some fairly wild and wide-open towns. But they had owed their wildness and excitement to the range and the omnipresent cowboy. He had gambled in the hells of Juarez, across the Texas border, where there was no law. Some of the Montana cattle towns were far from slow. But here he sensed a new element. And soon he grasped it as the fever of the rush for gold. The excitement of it took hold of him, so that he had to reason with himself to shake it off.

The town appeared about a mile long, spread out on two sides of the main street. Pan estimated that he must have passed three thousand people during his stroll, up one side of the street and down the other. Even if these made up the whole population it was enough to insure a good-sized town.

Pan's guide eventually led him into the Yellow Mine.

He saw a room full of moving figures, thin wreaths of blue smoke that floated in the glaring yellow lights. A bar ran the whole length of this room, and drinkers were crowded in front of it. The clink of glass, the clink of gold, the incessant murmur of hoarse voices almost drowned faint strains of music from another room that opened from this one.

The thousand and one saloons and gambling-dives that Pan had seen could not in any sense compare with this one. This was on a big scale without restraint of law or order. Piles of gold and greenbacks littered the tables where roulette, faro, poker were in progress. Black-garbed, pale, hard-faced gamblers sat with long mobile hands on the tables. Bearded men, lean-faced youths bent with intent gaze over their cards. Sloe-eyed Mexicans in their high-peaked sombreros and gaudy trappings lounged here and there, watching, waiting—for what did not seem clear to Pan. Drunken miners in their shirt sleeves stamped through the open door, to or from the bar. An odor of whisky mingled with that of tobacco smoke. Young women with bare arms and necks and painted faces were in evidence, some alone, most of them attended by men.

The gambling games attracted Pan. Like all cowboys he had felt the fascination of games of chance. In one corner of the big room, almost an alcove, Pan espied a large round table at which were seated six players engrossed in a game of poker. He saw thousands of dollars in gold and notes on that table. A pretty, flashy girl with bold eyes and a lazy, sleepy smile hung over the shoulder of one of the gamblers.

Pan's comrade nudged him in the side.

"What? Where?" whispered Pan and his glance swept everywhere.

Brown was gazing with gleaming eyes at the young card player over whose shoulder the white-armed girl hung.

Then Pan saw a face that was strangely familiar—a handsome face with large sensual mouth, bold eyes, and a broad low brow. The young gambler was Dick Hardman.

Pan knew him. The recognition gave Pan a start, a twinge, and then sent a slow heat along his veins. He laughed to find the boyishness of old still alive in him. After eight years of hard life

on the ranges! By that sudden resurging of long forgotten emotion Pan judged the nature of what the years had made him. It would be interesting to see how Dick Hardman met him.

But it was the girl who first seemed drawn by Pan's piercing gaze. She caught it—then looked a second time. Sliding off the arms of Hardman's chair, she moved with undulating motion of her slender form, and with bright eyes, round the table toward Pan. And at that moment Dick Hardman looked up from his cards and watched her.

Chapter Six

Pan Smith's Homecoming

HELLO, cowboy. How'd I ever miss you?" she questioned roguishly, running her bright eyes from his face down to his spurs and back again.

"Why good evening, Lady," replied Pan, removing his sombrero and bowing, with his genial smile. "I just come to town."

She took his hands in hers and dragged him out a little away from Brown. Again she looked Pan up and down.

"Did you take off that big hat because you know you're mighty good to look at?" she asked archly.

"Well, no, hardly," answered Pan. "It's a habit I have when I meet a pretty girl."

"Thank you. Does she have to be *pretty?*"

"Reckon not. Any girl, Miss."

"You are a stranger in Marco. Look out somebody doesn't shoot a hole in that hat when you doff it."

While she smiled up at him, losing something of the hawklike, possession-taking manner that had at first characterized her, Pan could see Dick Hardman staring hard across the table. Before Pan could find a reply for the girl one of the gamesters, an unshaven scowling fellow, addressed Hardman.

"Say, air you playin' cairds or watchin' your dame make up to that big hat an' high boots?"

Pan grasped the opportunity, though he never would have let that remark pass under any circumstances. He disengaged his right hand from the girl's, and stepping up to the table, drawing her with him, he bent a glance upon the disgruntled gambler.

"Excuse me, Mister," he began, "but did you mean me?"

His tone, his presence, drew the attention of all at the table, especially the one he addressed, and Hardman. The former laid down his cards. Shrewd eyes took Pan's measure, surely not missing the gun at his hip.

"Suppose I did mean you?" demanded the gambler.

"Well, if you did I'd have to break up your game," replied Pan apologetically. "You see, Mister, it hurts my feelings to have anyone make fun of my clothes."

"All right, cowboy, no offense meant," returned the other, at which everyone except Hardman let out a laugh. "But you'll break up our game anyhow, if you don't trot off with Louise there."

His further remark, dryly sarcastic, mostly directed at Hardman, did not help the situation, so far as Pan was concerned. It was, however, exactly what Pan wanted. Dick stared insolently and fixedly at Pan. He appeared as much puzzled as annoyed. Manifestly he was trying to place Pan, and did not

succeed. Pan stood there a moment, giving his old enemy eye for eye. His steady gaze disconcerted Dick, who turned his glance on the amused girl. Then his face darkened and he uttered harshly:

"Go on, you cat! And don't purr round me any more!"

Insolently she laughed in his face. "You forget I can scratch." Then she drew Pan away from the table, beckoning for Brown to come also. Halting presently near the opening into the dance hall, she said, "I'm always starting fights. What might your name be, cowboy?"

"Well, it might be Tinkerdam, but it isn't," replied Pan nonchalantly.

"Aren't you funny?" She turned to Brown. "I know your face."

"Sure you do, Miss Louise," said Brown easily. "I'm a miner an' I often drop in here to see the fun."

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Charley Brown, an' that's straight."

"Thanks, Charley. Now tell me who's this big good-looking pard of yours? I just want to know. You can't fool me about men. He doffs his hat to *me*. He talks nice and low, and smiles as no men smile at me. Then he bluffs the toughest nut in this town. Who *is* he?"

"All right, I'll introduce you," drawled Brown. "Meet Panhandle Smith, from Texas."

"Well," she mused, fastening her hands in the lapels of his coat. "I thought you'd have a high-sounding handle. Will you dance with me?"

"Sure, but I'm afraid I step pretty high and wide."

They entered another garish room, around which a throng of couples spun and wagged. Pan danced with the girl, and despite the jostling of the heavy-footed miners acquitted himself in a manner he thought was creditable for him.

"That was a treat after those clod-hoppers," she said, when the dance ended. "You're a modest boy, Panhandle. You've got me guessing. I'm not used to your kind—out here. Let's go have a drink. I've got to have whisky."

That jarred somewhat upon Pan and, as she led him back to Brown and then both of them to an empty table, he began to grasp the significance of these bare-armed white-faced girls with their dark-hollowed eyes and scarlet lips.

She drank straight whisky, and it was liquor that burned Pan like fire. Brown, too, made a wry face.

"Panhandle, are you going to stay here in Marco?" she inquired, leaning on her white round arms.

"Yes, if I find my folks," he replied simply. "They lost all they had—ranch, cattle, horses—and moved out here. I never knew until I went back home. Makes me feel pretty mean. But Dad was doing well when I left home."

"Mother—sister, too?"

"Yes. And my sister Alice must be quite a girl now," mused Pan.

"And you're going to help them?" she asked softly.

"I should smile," said Pan feelingly.

"Then, you mustn't buy drinks for me—or run after me—as I was going to make you do."

Pan was at a loss for a reply to that frank statement. And as he gazed at her, conscious of a subtle change, someone pounded him on the back.

"My Gawd—if heah ain't Panhandle!" burst out a husky voice.

The voice had prepared Pan for an old acquaintance, and when he saw that lean red face and blue eyes he knew them.

"Well, I'll be darned. Blinky Moran! You son of a gun! Drunk—the same as when I saw you last."

"Aw, Pan, sheein' you—ole pard—my Gawd! It's like cold sweet water on my hot face."

"Blink, I'm sure glad to see you, drunk or sober," replied Pan warmly. "What're you doing out here?"

Moran braced himself. "Pan, meet my pard heah," he began, indicating a stalwart young man in overalls and high boots. "Gus Hans, puncher of Montana."

Pan shook hands with the grinning cowboy.

"Pard, yore shakin' the paw of Panhandle Smith," announced Moran in solemn emotion. "This heah's the boy, frien's. You've heerd me rave many's the time. He was my pard, my bunkmate, my brother. We rode the Cimarron together, an' we was the only straight punchers in the Long Bar C outfit that was drove out of Wyomin'. His beat never forked a hoss or coiled a rope. An' shorer'n hell, pard, I'd been a rustler but fer Panhandle. More'n onct he throwed his gun fer me an'—"

"Say, Blink, I'll have to choke you," interrupted Pan, laughing. "Now, you meet my friends here, Miss Louise—and Charley Brown."

Pan did not miss the effect the bright-eyed red-lipped girl made upon the cowboys, especially Moran, who, he remembered, had always succumbed easily to feminine charms.

Rising from the table, Louise went round to Pan and looked up at him with both wistfulness and recklessness in her face.

"Panhandle Smith, I'll leave you to your friends," she said. "But don't you drift in here again—for if you do—I'll forget my sacrifice for little Alice. There!"

She kissed him square on the lips and ran off without a backward glance.

Blinky fell into a chair, overcome. He stared comically at Pan.

"Say, ole pard, you used to be shy of skirts!" he expostulated.

"Reckon I am yet, for all the evidence," retorted Pan, half amused and half angry at the unexpected move of the girl.

"Pan, thet there girl is Louie Melliss!" ejaculated Moran.

"Is it! Well, who in the deuce is she?"

"Say, cowboy, quit your foolin'!"

"Honest, I never saw or heard of the young lady till a few minutes ago. Ask Brown."

"That's a fact," corroborated Brown. "She's the belle of this hell. Sure, Smith, you savvy that?"

"No," rejoined Pan bluntly. "I've holed up in a few gambling-hells where drinks and scraps went pretty lively. But this is the first one for me where there were a lot of half-naked girls."

"You're west of the Rockies, now," replied Brown grimly. "An' you'll soon find that out in more ways than one. Louie Melliss is straight from Frisco, an' chain-lightnin' to her fingertips, so they say. Been some bad messes over her. But they say too, she's as white an' square as any good woman."

"Aw! Reckon I'm pretty much of a tenderfoot," returned Pan. His regret was for the pretty, audacious girl whose boldness of approach he had not understood.

"For Gawd's sake, pard," began Moran, recovering from his shock. "Don't you come ridin' around heah fer thet little devil to get stuck on you. She's shore agoin' to give young Hardman a bootiful trimmin'. An' let her do it!"

"Oh. So you don't care much about young Hardman?" inquired Pan with interest.

"I'd like to throw a gun on him an' onct I damn near done it."

"What for?"

"He an' another feller jumped the only claim I ever struck thet showed any color," went on Moran, with an earnestness that showed excitement had sobered him. "I went back one mawnin' an' there was Hardman an' a miner named Purcell. They ran me off, swore it was their claim. Purcell said he'd worked it before an' sold it to Jard Hardman. Thet's young Hardman's dad, an' he wouldn't fit in any square hole. I went to Matthews an' raised a holler. But I couldn't prove nothin'. An' by Gawd, Pan, thet claim is a mine now, payin' well."

"Tough luck, Blink. Say, Brown, is that sort of deal worked often?"

"Common as dirt, in the early days of a find," replied Brown. "I haven't heard of any claim jumpin' just lately, though. It's like rustlin' cattle. You know most every cowman now and then picks up some unbranded stock that he knows isn't his. But he takes it along. Now claim jumpin' is somethin' like that. If a feller leaves his claim for a day or a week he's liable to come back an' find someone has jumped it. I never leave mine in the daytime, an' I have witnesses to that."

"Blinky, I came out here to find my dad," said Pan. "How am I going to find out quick if he is here, and where?"

"Easy as pie. Go to the stage office, where they get the mail an' express. Matty Smith has been handlin' thet since this heah burg was a kid in short dresses."

"Good. I'll go the first thing in the morning. Now, you little knock-kneed, bowlegged two-bit cowpuncher! What-'re you doing with those things on your boots?"

"Huh! What things?" queried Moran.

"Why, those long shiny things that jingle when you walk."

"Haw! Haw! By gum, I been needin' them. Ask Gus there. We've been wranglin' wild hosses. Broomtails, they calls them heah. We've been doin' pretty good. Hardman an' Wiggate pay twelve dollars an' four bits a hoss on the hoof. Right heah in Marco. We could get more if we could risk shippin' to St. Louis. But thet's a hell of a job. Long ways to the railroad, an' say, mebbe drivin' them broomies isn't tough! Then two of us anyhow would have to go on the freight train with the hosses. Shore we cain't figger it thet way now. But later when we ketch a thousand haid we may try it."

"A thousand head! Blinky, are you still on the ground? You're talkin' fifteen thousand dollars."

"Shore. An' I'm tellin' you, Pan, thet we can make it. But ketchin' these wild hosses in any number hasn't been done yet. Hardman has an outfit ridin'. But them fellers couldn't get away from their own dust. We're not so blame swift, either. S'pose you throw in with us, Pan. Will you? An' have you got any money?"

"Yes to both questions, old-timer. But I've got to find Dad before I get careless with my money. Where are you boys staying?"

"We got a camp just out of town. We got lots of room an' welcome for you, but no bedroll."

"I'll buy an outfit in the morning and throw in with you—Hello, there's shooting. Gunplay. Let's get out of this

place where there's more room and air."

With that they, and many others, left the hall and joined the moving crowd in the street. Pan halted at the steps of the hotel.

"Blink, I'm going to turn in. Call for me in the morning. I can't tell you how glad I am that I ran into you boys. And you, too, Brown. I'd like to see more of you."

They shook hands and parted. Pan entered the hotel, and went to his room. *Lucky to meet those boys,* he soliloquized, as he undressed. *Now to find Dad—Mother—Alice! Lord, I hope all's well with them. But I've a feeling it isn't—And Lucy! I wonder will she be here too. Will* she *recognize me? I'll bet a million she does. Funny about Dick Hardman. Never knew me. Didn't he look, though? And that girl Louise. She had to laugh and talk all the time to hide the sadness of her face. At that, she's too good for Dick Hardman. I'll bet another million we clash again.*

Pan was up bright and early, enjoying the keen desert air. The little spell of morbid doubt and worry that had settled upon him did not abide in the clear rosy light of day. Hope and thrill resurged in him.

Blinky and his partner soon appeared, and quarreled over who should carry Pan's baggage out to their quarters. The boys had a big tent set up on a frame work of wood, an open shed which they used as a kitchen, and a big corral. The site was up on a gradual slope, somewhat above the town, and rendered attractive by a small brook and straggling cedars. They had a Mexican cook who was known as Lying Juan.

The boys talked so fast they almost neglected to eat their breakfast. They were full of enthusiasm, which fact Pan could not but see was owing to his arrival. It amused, yet it touched him.

"Wal, ole-timer, we'll rustle now," finally said Moran. "We've got aboot fifty broomies out heah in a canyon. We'll drive 'em in today, an' also some saddle hosses for you."

"I'll buy a horse," interposed Pan.

"You'll do nothin' of the sort. Ain't we got a string of hosses, an' there shore might be *one* of them good enough even for Panhandle Smith. But you want a saddle. There's one in Black's store."

Gus came trotting up on a spirited sorrel, leading two other well-pointed horses, saddled, champing their bits. Sight of them was good for Pan's eyes. Moran leaped astride one of them, and then said hesitatingly:

"Pard, shore hope you hev good luck findin' your dad."

Pan shaved, put on a clean flannel shirt and new scarf, and leaving his coat behind he strode off toward the town. The business of the day had begun, and there was considerable bustle. Somebody directed him to the stage and express office, a plain board building off the main street. Three men lounged before it.

"Morning, gents," he said easily. "Is the agent, Smith, around?"

"Howdy, stranger," replied one of them, looking Pan over. "Smith just stepped over to the bank. He'll be back pronto."

Another of the group straightened up to run a hard gray eye from Pan's

spurs to his sombrero, and back for a second glance at his low-hanging gun. He was a tall man and had a big sandy mustache. He moved to face Pan, and either by accident or design the flap of his coat fell back to expose a bright silver shield on his vest.

"Reckon you're new in these parts?" he queried.

"Yep. Just rode in," replied Pan cheerfully.

"See you're packin' hardware," went on the other.

Pan at once took this man to be Matthews, the town marshal mentioned by Charley Brown. He had not needed Brown's hint; he had encountered many sheriffs of like stripe. Pan returned the sheriff's curious scrutiny with a cool stare.

"Am I packing a gun?" rejoined Pan, with pretended surprise, as he looked down at his hip. "Sure, so I am. Clean forgot it, Mister. Habit of mine."

"What's a habit?" snapped the other.

Pan now shot a straight level gaze into the hard gray eyes of the sheriff. "Why, my packing a gun—when I'm in bad company."

"Pretty strong talk, cowboy, west of the Rockies. I'm Matthews, the town marshal."

"I knew that, and I'm right glad to meet you," rejoined Pan pertly. He made no move to meet the half-proffered hand, and his steady gaze disconcerted the marshal.

Another man came briskly up, carrying papers in his hand.

"Are you the agent, Mr. Smith?" asked Pan.

"I am thet air, young feller."

"Can I see you a moment, on business?"

"Come right in." He ushered Pan into his office.

"My name's Smith," began Pan hurriedly. "I'm hunting for my dad—Bill Smith. Do you know him—if he's in Marco?"

"Bill Smith's cowboy! Wal, put her thar," burst out the other heartily, shoving out a big hand. "Know Bill? Wal, I should smile. We're neighbors an' good friends."

Pan was so overcome by relief and sudden joy that he could not speak for a moment, but he wrung the agent's hand.

"Wal, now, sort of hit you in the gizzard, hey?" he queried. He released his hand and put it on Pan's shoulder. "I've heard all about you, cowboy. Bill always talked a lot—until lately. Reckon he's deep hurt thet you never wrote."

"I've been pretty low-down," replied Pan with agitation. "But I never meant to be. I just drifted along—"

"Wal, forget thet now, son," said the agent kindly. "Boys will be boys, especially cowboys. You've been a wild one, if reports comin' to Bill was true. But you've come home to make up to him. Lord knows he needs you, boy."

"Yes—I'll make it—up," replied Pan, trying to swallow his emotion. "Tell me."

"Wal, your dad's had tough luck. After he lost his ranch he follered the man who'd done him out here to try to make him square up. Bill only got a worse deal. Then he got started again pretty good an' lost out because of a dry year. Now he's workin' in Carter's Wagon Shop. He's a first-rate carpenter. But his wages are small, an' he can't never get nowhere. He's talked some of wild-hoss wranglin'. But thet takes an outfit, which he ain't got. I'll give you a hunch, son. If you can stake

your dad to an otufit an' throw in with him you might give him another start."

Pan had on his tongue an enthusiastic reply to that, but the entrance of the curious Matthews halted him.

"Thank, you, Mr. Smith," he said eagerly. "Where'll I find Carter's Wagon Shop?"

"Other end of town. Right down Main Street. You can't miss it."

Pan hurried out, and through the door he heard Matthews's loud voice: "Carter's Wagon Shop! By thunder, I've got the hunch! That cowboy is Panhandle Smith!"

Pan smiled grimly to himself, as he passed on out of hearing. The name and fame that had meant so little to him back on the prairie ranges might stand him in good stead out here west of the Rockies.

At last he reached the outskirts of Marco and espied the building and sign he was so eagerly seeking. Resounding hammer strokes came from the shop. His long journey was at an end.

Pan entered the shop. He espied a man wielding a hammer on a wheel. His back was turned. But Pan knew him. Knew that back, that shaggy head beginning to turn gray, knew even the swing of arm! He approached leisurely.

"Howdy, Dad," he called.

His father's lax figure stiffened. He dropped the wheel, then the hammer. But not on the instant did he turn. His posture was strained, doubtful. Then he sprang erect, and whirled.

"For the good—Lord's sake—if it ain't Pan!" he gasped.

"It sure is, Dad. Are you glad to see me?"

"*Glad!* Reckon this'll save your mother's life!" and to Pan's amaze he felt himself crushed in his father's arms. That sort of thing had never been Bill Smith's way. His father released him, and drew back, as if suddenly ashamed of his emotion.

"Wal, Pan, you come back now—after long ago I gave up hopin'?" he queried haltingly.

"Yes, Dad," began Pan with swift rush or words. "I'm sorry. I always meant to come home. But one thing and another prevented. Then I never heard of your troubles. I never knew you needed me. Why didn't you *tell* me? But forget that. Now I've found you—and well, I want to make up to you and Mother."

"Ah-huh! Sounds like music to me," replied Smith. He eyed Pan up and down, walked round him twice. Then he suddenly burst out, "Wal, you long-legged strappin' son of a gun! If sight of you ain't good for sore eyes! Ah-huh! Look where he packs that gun!"

With slow strange action he reached down to draw Pan's gun from its holster. It was long and heavy, blue, with a deadly look. The father's intent gaze moved from it up to the face of the son. Pan realized what his father knew, what he thought. The moment was sickening for Pan.

"Pan, I've kept tab on you for years," spoke his father slowly, "but I'd have heard, even if I hadn't took pains to learn—Panhandle Smith! You damned hard-ridin', gun-throwin' son of mine! Once my heart broke because you drifted with the wild cowpunchers—but now—by God, I believe I'm glad."

"Dad, never mind range talk. You know how cowboys brag and blow. I'm not ashamed to face you and Mother. I've come clean."

"But, son, you've—you've used that gun!" whispered Smith hoarsely. "Panhandle Smith! They know here in

Marco. You're known, Pan, here west of the Rockies."

"Well, what of it?" flashed Pan. "I should think you'd be glad. Reckon it was all good practice for what I'll have to do out here."

"You've read my mind," replied Smith huskily. "I'm afraid. I'm almost sorry you came. Yet, right now I feel more of a man than for years."

"Dad, you can tell me everything some other time," rejoined Pan. "Now, I only want to know about Mother and Alice."

"They're well an' fine, son, though your mother grieves for you. An' Alice she's a big girl, goin' to school an' helpin' with work. An' Pan, you've got a baby brother nearly two years old."

"Jumping cowbells!" shouted Pan. "Where are they? Tell me quick."

"We live on a farm a mile or so out. I rent it for most nothin'. Hall, who owns it, has a big ranch. I've got an option on this farm, an' it shore is a bargain. Hundred an' ten acres, most of it cultivated. Good water, pasture, barn, an' nice little cabin. I work here mornin's, an' out there afternoons. You'll—"

"Stop talking about it. I'll buy the farm," interrupted Pan. "Where is it?"

"Keep right out this road. Second farmhouse," said his father, pointing to the west. "I'll be home at noon—Hey, hold on. There's more to tell. You'll get a—a jolt. Wait!"

But Pan rushed on out of the shop, and took to the road with the stride of a giant. To be compelled to walk, when if he had had his horse he could ride that mile in two minutes! His heart was beating high.

Mother! Grieving for me. Alice a big girl. And a baby boy! This is too good for a prodigal like me.

Pan passed the first farmhouse. The road turned to the right, round the slope of a low hill, Pan's quick eye caught a column of curling blue smoke that rose from a grove of trees. The house would be in there.

At last Pan reached the wagon gate that led into the farm. It bordered an orchard of fair-sized trees. He cut across the orchard so as to reach the house more quickly. It was still mostly hidden among the trees. His heart swelled full high in his breast. He could never meet his mother with his usual cool easy nonchalance.

Suddenly he espied a woman through the trees. He almost ran. No, it could not be his mother. This was a girl, lithe, tall, swift-stepping. His mother had been rather short and stout. Could this girl be his sister Alice? The swift supposition was absurd, because Alice was only about ten, and this girl was grown. She had a grace of motion that struck Pan. He hurried around some trees to intercept her.

Suddenly he came out of the shade to confront her, face to face. She uttered a cry and dropped something she had been carrying.

"Don't be scared, Miss," he said happily. "I'm no tramp, though I did rant in like a trespasser. I want to find Mrs. Bill Smith. I'm—"

But Pan got no further. The girl had reason to be scared, but should her hands fly to her bosom like that, and press there as if she had been hurt? He must have frightened her. And he was about to stammer his apologies, when the expression on her face struck him mute. Her healthy golden skin turned white. Her lips quivered, opened. Then her eyes—their color was violet and something about them seemed

to stab Pan. His mind went into a deadlock—seemed to whirl.

"*Pan! Pan!*" she cried, and moved toward him, her eyes widening, shining with a light he had never seen in another woman's. "Pan! Don't you—know me?"

"Sure—but I don't know *who* you are," Pan muttered in bewilderment.

"I'm Lucy! Oh, Pan—you've come back," she burst out huskily, with a deep break in her voice.

She seemed to leap toward him—into the arms he flung wide, as with tremendous shock he recognized her name, her voice, her eyes. It was a moment beyond reason. He was crushing her to his breast, kissing her in a frenzy of sudden realization of love. Lucy! Little Lucy Blake, his baby, his child sweetheart, his schoolmate! And the hunger of the long lonely years, never realized, leaped to his lips now.

She flung her arms round his neck, and for a few moments gave him kiss for kiss. Then suddenly she shivered and her head fell forward on his breast.

Pan held her closely, striving for self-control. What a homecoming! Lucy, grown into a tall beautiful girl who had never forgotten him. He was shaken to his depths by the revelation that now came to him. He had always loved Lucy! He held her, wrapped her closer, bent his face to her fragrant hair. It was dull gold now. Once it had been bright, shiny, light. He kissed it, conscious of unutterable gratitude and exaltation.

She stirred, put her hands to his breast, and broke away from him, tragic-eyed, strange. "Pan, I—I was beside myself," she whispered. "Forgive me—Oh, the joy of seeing you. It was too much—Go to your mother. She—will—"

"Yes, presently, but Lucy, don't feel badly about this—about my not recognizing you at once," he interrupted, in glad swift eagerness. "How you have grown! Changed! Lucy, your hair is gold now. You're so changed—so—so—Lucy, you're beautiful! I've come back to you. I always loved you. I didn't know it as I do now, but I've been true to you. Lucy, I swear. I'm Panhandle Smith and as wild as any of that prairie outfit. But, darling, I've been *true* to you—*true*. And I've come back to love you, to make up for absence, to take care of you—marry you. Oh, darling, I know you've been true to me—you've waited for me."

Rapture and agony both seemed to be struggling for the mastery over Lucy. Pan suddenly divined that this was the meaning of her emotion.

"My God!" she whispered finally, warding him off. "Don't you know—haven't you heard?"

"Nothing. What's wrong?"

"Go to your mother. Give me a little while to—to get hold of myself."

"Are—are you married?" he faltered.

"No—no—but—"

"Don't you love me?"

She made no reply, except to cover her face with shaking hands. They could not hide the betraying scarlet.

"Lucy, you *must* love me," he rushed on almost incoherently. "You gave yourself away—It lifted me—changed me. All my life I've loved you, though I never realized it. Your kisses—they made me know myself. But, my God, *say* that you love me!"

"Yes, Pan, I do love you," she replied quietly, lifting her eyes to his. Again the rich color fled.

"Then, nothing else matters," cried Pan. "Whatever's wrong, I'll make right. I've much to make up for. Forgive me for

this—whatever has hurt you so. I'll go now to Mother and see you later. You'll stay?"

"I live here with your people," replied Lucy and walked away through the trees.

"Something wrong!" muttered Pan as he watched her go. But the black fear of he knew not what could not stand before his consciousness of finding Lucy, of seeing her betray her love. Doubt lingered, but his glad heart downed that too. He was home.

Flowers bordered the sandy path around the cabin. The house had been constructed of logs and later improved with a frame addition, unpainted, weather stained, covered with vines. A cozy little porch, with wide eaves and a windbreak of vines, faced the south. Pan heard a child singing, then a woman's mellow voice.

Pan drew a long breath. It had come —the moment he had long dreamed of. He stepped loudly upon the porch, and he knocked upon the door frame.

"Who's there?" called the voice again. It made Pan's heart beat fast. In deep husky tones he replied:

"Just a poor starved cowboy, Ma'am, beggin' a little grub."

"Gracious me!" she exclaimed, and her footsteps thudded on the floor inside.

Pan knew his words would fetch her. Then he saw her come to the door. Years, trouble, pain had wrought their havoc, but he would have known her at first sight among a thousand women.

"Mother!" he called poignantly, and stepped toward her, with his arms out.

She seemed stricken. The kindly eyes changed, rolled. Her mouth opened wide. She gasped and fainted in his arms.

A little while later, when she had recovered from the shock and the rapture of Pan's return, they sat in the neat little room.

"Bobby, don't you know your big brother?" Pan was repeating to the big-eyed boy who regarded him so solemnly . . . "Mother, I reckon you'll never let Bobby be a cowboy."

"Never," she murmured fervently.

"Well, he might do worse," went on Pan. "But we'll make a plain rancher of him, with a leaning to horses. How's that?"

"I'd like it, but not in a wild country like this," she replied.

"Reckon we'd do well to figure on a permanent home in Arizona, where both summers and winters are pleasant, I've heard a lot about Arizona. We'll go there, someday."

"Then, Pan, you've come home to stay?" she asked with agitation.

"Yes, Mother," he assured her, squeezing the worn hand that kept reaching to touch him, as if to see if he were real. "Mother, there's a million things to talk about. You say Alice is in school. When will she be home?"

"Late this afternoon. Pan," she went on hesitatingly, "Lucy Blake lives with us now."

"Yes, I met Lucy outside," replied Pan, drawing a deep breath. "But first about Dad. Is Dad well in health?"

"He's well enough, but worry drags him down."

"We'll cheer him up. At Littleton I heard a little about Dad's bad luck. Now you tell me everything."

"There's little to tell," she replied sadly. "Your father made foolish deals,

the last and biggest of which was with Jard Hardman. There came a bad year —*año seco*, the Mexicans call it. Failure of crops left your father ruined. He lost the farm. He found later that Hardman had cheated him out of his cattle. We followed Hardman out here. Our neighbors the Blakes had come ahead of us. Hardman not only wouldn't be square about the cattle deal but he knocked your father out again, just as he had another start. In my mind it was worse than the cattle deal.

"We bought a homestead from a man named Sprague. It had water, good soil, some timber, and an undeveloped mining claim that turned out well. Then along comes Jard Hardman with claims, papers, witnesses, and law back of him. He claimed to have gotten possession of the homestead from the original owner. It was all a lie. But they put us off. Then your father tried several things that did not pan out. Now we're here—and he has to work in the wagon shop to pay the rent."

"Ah-huh!" replied Pan. "And now about Lucy. How does it come she's living with you?"

"She had no home, poor girl," replied his mother hastily. "She came out here with her father and uncle. Her mother died soon after you left us. Jim Blake had interests with Hardman here. He talked big—and drank a good deal. He and Hardman quarreled. It was the same big deal that ruined your father. But Jim came here with Hardman. They were getting along all right when we arrived. But trouble soon arose—over Lucy. Young Dick Hardman—you certainly ought to remember him—fell madly in love with Lucy. Dick always was a wild boy. Here in Marco he went the pace.

"Well, bad as Jard Hardman is he loves that boy and would move heaven and earth for him. Lucy despised Dick. The more he ran after her the more she despised him. Also the more she flouted Dick the wilder he drank and gambled. Now here comes the pitiful part of it. Jim Blake went utterly to the bad, so your father says, though Lucy hopes and believes she can save him. I do too. Jim was only weak. Jard Hardman ruined him.

"Finally Dick enlisted his father in his cause and they forced Jim to try to make Lucy marry Dick. She refused. She left her father's place and went to live with her Uncle Bill. But he was shot in the Yellow Mine. By accident, they gave out, but your father scouts that idea. Lucy came to live with us. She taught the school. But she had to give that up. Dick Hardman and other wild young fellows made her life wretched. Besides, she was never safe. And then the—the worst happened."

Mrs. Smith paused, wiping her wet eyes, and appeared to dread further disclosure.

"What—what was it, Mother?" Pan asked fearfully.

"Then—then they put Jim Blake in jail."

"What for?" flashed Pan.

"To hold him there, pending action back east. Jim Blake was a cattle thief. There's little doubt of that, your father says. You know there's law back east, at least now in some districts. Well, Jard Hardman is holding Jim in jail. It seems Hardman will waive trial, provided—provided—Oh, how can I tell you!"

"My God! I see!" cried Pan, leaping in fierce passion. "They will try to force Lucy to marry Dick to save her father."

"Yes. That's it—and Pan, my son—she has consented!"

"So that was what made her act so strange! Poor Lucy! Dick Hardman was a skunk when he was a kid. Now he's a skunk-bitten coyote. Oh, but this is a mess!"

"Pan, what *can* you do?" implored his mother.

"Lucy *hasn't* married him yet?" cried Pan suddenly.

"Oh, no. She has only promised. She doesn't trust those men. She wants papers signed to clear her father. They laugh at her. But Lucy is no fool. When she sacrifices herself it'll not be for nothing."

Pan slowly sank down into the chair, and his brooding gaze fastened on the big blue gun with which Bobby was playing now. It fascinated Pan. Sight of it brought the strange cold sensation that seemed like a wind through his being.

"Mother, how old is Lucy?" he asked.

"She's nearly seventeen, but looks older."

"Not of age yet. Yes, she looks twenty. She's a woman, Mother."

"What did Lucy do and say when she saw you?" asked his mother, with a woman's intense curiosity.

"Mother, she ran right into my arms. We just met, Mother, and the old love leaped."

"Mercy, what a terrible situation for you both, especially for Lucy. Pan, what *can* you do?"

"Mother, I don't know, I can't think. It's too sudden. But I'll never let her marry Dick Hardman. Why, only last night I saw a painted little hussy hanging over him. Bad as that poor girl must be, she's too good for him. *He* doesn't worry me, nor his schemes to get Lucy. But how to save Jim Blake?"

"Lucy has a heart of fire. Only save her father, Pan, and you will be blessed with such woman's love as you never dreamed of. It may be hard, though, for you to change her mind."

"I won't try, Mother."

"Go to her, then, and fill her with the hope you've given me."

Chapter Seven

"*Throw Your Gun!*"

FROM a thick clump of trees Pan watched Lucy, spied upon her with only love, tenderness, pity in his heart. But he did not know her. It seemed incredible that he could confess to himself he loved her.

Lucy stood like a statue, gazing into nothingness. Then she paced to and fro, her hands clenched on her breast. This was a secluded nook, where a bench had been built between two low-branching trees, on the bank of the stream. Pan stealthily slipped closer, so he could get clearer sight of her face. Was her love for him the cause of her emotion?

Pan had not encountered a great many girls in the years he had ridden the ranges. But he had seen enough to recognize beauty when it was thrust upon him. And Lucy had that. As she paced away from him the small gold head, the heavy braid of hair, the fine build of her, not robust, yet strong and full, answered then and there the wondering query of his admiration. Then she turned to pace back. She had been weeping, yet her face was white. Indeed she did look older than her seventeen years. Closer she came. Then Pan's gaze got as far as her eyes and fixed there. They betrayed to Pan the

thing he yearned so to know. Not only her love but her revolt!

He stepped out to confront Lucy, smiling and cool.

"Howdy, Lucy," he drawled.

"Oh!" she cried, startled, and drew back. Then she recovered.

"I was hiding behind there," he said, indicating the trees and bushes.

"What for?"

"I wanted to *see* you really, without you knowing. As I remember little Lucy Blake she never had any promise of growing so—so lovely as you are now."

"Pan, don't tease—don't flatter me now," she implored.

"Reckon I was just stating a fact. Let's sit down on the seat there, and get acquainted."

He put her in the corner of the bench so she would have to face him, and he began to talk as if there were no black trouble between them. He wanted her to know the story of his life from the time she had seen him last; he had two reasons for this, first to bridge that gap in their acquaintance, and secondly to let her know what the range had made him.

"That's my story, Lucy," he said in conclusion. "It's over now, and I've found you and my people all well, thank God. Nothing else mattered to me. And your trouble and Dad's bad luck do not scare me. Now tell me your story."

He had reached her. It had been wise for him to go back to the school days, and spare nothing of his experience. Now she told the story of those lonely years when his few letters were great events, and the effect it had when they ceased. So, with simple directness, she went on to relate the downfall of her father and how the disgrace and heartbreak had killed her mother. When she finished her story she was crying.

"Lucy, don't cry. Just think—here we are!" he exclaimed.

"That's what—makes me cry."

"Very well. Here. Cry on my shoulder," he said forcefully, and despite her resistance he drew her into his arms and her head to his breast. There he held her, feeling the strain of her muscles slowly relax.

"Pan, this is—is foolish," she said, presently stirring. "I mean my crying here in your arms, as if it were a refuge. How can I lay my head on your shoulder? I didn't. You forced me to."

"Well, if you want to deny me such happiness, you can," replied Pan.

"Is it happiness for you—knowing it's wrong—and can never be again?" she whispered.

"Pure heaven!" he said. "Lucy, don't say this is wrong. You belong to *me*."

"My soul does, yes," she returned. "Pan, you don't seem to recognize anything but your own will," she returned, pondering. "I've *got* to save my father—there's only one way."

"Don't talk such rot to me," he flashed sharply. "You've been frightened into a deal that is terrible for you. No wonder. But you're only a kid yet. What do you know of men? These Hardmans are crooked. Matthews, magistrate or marshal, whatever he calls himself, he's crooked too. I *know* such men. I've met a hundred of them. Slowly they've been forced farther west, beyond the Rockies. And here they work their will. But it can't last. Why, Lucy, I'm amazed that some miner or gun fighter hasn't stopped them long ago."

"Pan, you must be wrong," she declared earnestly. "Hardman cheated Dad, yes. But that was only Dad's fault,

his blindness in business. Hardman is a power here. And Matthews, too. You talk like a—a wild cowboy."

"Sure," replied Pan. "And it'll take just a wild cowboy to clean up this mess. Now, Lucy, don't go white and sick. I promise you I'll listen to Dad and you before I make a move. I'll go to see your father. And I'll call on Hardman. I'll talk sense and reason, and business to these men. I know it'll not amount to beans, but I'll do it just to show you I can be deliberate and sane."

"Thank you—you frightened me so," she murmured. "Pan, there was something terrible about you—then."

"Listen, Lucy," he began, more seriously. "I've been here in Marco only a few hours. But this country is no place for us to settle down to live. I've heard a lot about Arizona. I'm going to take you all down there. I'll get your father out of jail—"

"Pan, are you dreaming?" she interrupted. "Dad is a rustler. He admits it. Back east he can be jailed for years. And I've got to marry Dick Hardman to save him."

"You poor little girl! Now, Lucy, let me tell you something funny. Rustler, you call your dad. What's that? A cowman who has appropriated cattle not his own, driven off unbranded stock and branded it. There's no difference. Lucy, my dad rustled cattle. So have all the ranchers I ever rode for."

"Pan!" she gasped. "What are you saying?"

"I'm trying to tell you one of the queer facts about the ranges," replied Pan. "I've known cowmen to shoot rustlers. Cowmen who had themselves branded cattle not their own. This was a practice. They didn't think it crooked. They all did it. But it *was* crooked, when you come down to truth. And though that may not be legally as criminal as the stealing of branded cattle, to my mind it is just as bad. Your father began that way, Hardman caught him, and perhaps forced him into worse practice."

"Pan, are you trying to give me some hope?"

"Reckon I am. Things are not so bad. My Lord, suppose I'd been a month later!"

Lucy shook her head despondently. "It's worse *now* for me than if you had come—"

"Why?" interrupted Pan.

"Because to see you—be with you like this—before I'm—if I have to be married—is perfectly terrible."

That not only made Pan lose patience but it also angered him. The hot blood rushed to his face. "Lucy! Haven't I told you that you're not going to marry Dick Hardman?"

"Oh, but I'll have to," she replied stubbornly. "I must save Dad. You might indeed get him out of jail some way. But that would not save him."

"Certainly it would. In another state he would be perfectly safe."

"They'll trail him anywhere. No, that won't do. We haven't time. Dick is pressing me hard to marry him at once, or his father will prosecute Dad. I promised. And today—this morning—Dick is coming here to get me to set the day."

"*What?*" cried Pan passionately.

His word, swift as a bullet, made her jump, but she repeated what she had said almost word for word.

"And your answer?" queried Pan in hot scorn.

"Sooner the—better," she replied mournfully. "I can't stand—this—you—

oh, anything would be—easier than your—your love-making!"

"Lucy Blake, what kind of a woman are you? If you love me, it's a crime to marry him. Women do these things, I know—sell themselves. But they kill their souls. If you could save your father from being hanged, it would still be wrong. Suppose he *did* go to jail for a few years. What's that compared to hell for you all your life? You're out of your head. You must *care* for this damned skunk Dick Hardman."

"Care for him!" she cried, furious. "I hate him."

"Then if you marry him you'll be crooked. To yourself! To me! Don't you dare say again you'll marry Dick."

"I will—I must—"

"Lucy!" he thundered. It was no use to reason with this girl. She had been trapped like a wild thing and could not see any way out. He shot out a strong hand and clutched her shoulder and with one heave he drew her to him, so her face was under his. It went pale. The telltale eyes dilated in sudden fear. She beat at him with weak fluttering hands.

"*Say you love me!*"

He shook her roughly, then held her tight. "I don't maul any other man's woman," he went on fiercely. "But if you love me—that's different. You said it a little while ago. Was it true? Are you a liar?"

"No—No—Pan," she whispered, in distress. "I— do."

"Do what?"

"I—I love you," she said, the scarlet blood mounting to her pale face. Her eyes held a sort of dark spell.

"How do you love me?" he queried relentlessly.

"Always I've loved you—since I was a baby."

"As a brother?"

"Yes."

"But we're man and woman now. This is my one chance for happiness. I don't want you—I wouldn't have you unless you love me as I do you. Be honest with me. Be square. Do you love me now as I do you?"

"God help me—yes," she replied, almost inaudibly, with eyes of remorse and love and agony on his.

Pan could not withstand this. He crushed her to him, and lifted her arms round his neck, and fell to kissing her with all the starved hunger of his lonely loveless years on the ranges. She was not proof against this. It lifted her out of her weakness, of her abasement, to a response that swept away all fears, doubts, troubles. For the moment, at least, love conquered her.

Pan was wrenched out of the ecstasy of that moment by the pound of hoofs and the crashing of brush. He could not disengage himself before a horse and rider were upon them. Nevertheless Pan recognized the intruder and leaped away from the bench with the instinctive swiftness for defense that had been ingrained in him.

Dick Hardman showed the most abject astonishment. His eyes stuck out, his jaw dropped. He stared from Lucy to Pan and back again. A slow dull red began to creep into his cheeks. He ejaculated something incoherent. His amaze swiftly grew into horror. He had caught his fiancée in the arms of another man. Black fury suddenly possessed him.

"You—you—" he yelled stridently, moving to dismount.

"Stay on your horse," commanded Pan.

"Who the hell are you?" bellowed Hardman, sliding back in the saddle.

"Howdy, Skunk Hardman," rejoined Pan, with cool impudence.

"Pan Smith!" gasped the other hoarsely, and he turned lividly white. "By God, I knew you last night. But I couldn't place you."

"Well, Mr. Dick Hardman, I knew you the instant I set eyes on you—sitting there gambling—with the pretty, bare-armed girl on your chair," returned Pan with deliberate sarcasm.

"Yes, and you got that little—over to you about as quick."

"Be careful of your language. There's a lady present," replied Pan menacingly.

"Of all the nerve! You—you damned cowpuncher," raved Hardman in a fury. "It didn't take you long to get to *her*, either, did it? Now you make tracks out of here or I'll—I'll—it'll be the worse for you, Pan Smith. Lucy Blake is as good as married to me."

"Nope, you're wrong, Dick," snapped Pan insolently. "I got here just in time to save her from that doubtful honor."

"You'd break her engagement to me?" rasped Hardman huskily.

"I have broken it."

"Lucy, tell me he lies!" begged Hardman.

Lucy came out into the sunlight. She was pale, but composed.

"Dick, it's true," she said steadily. "I've broken my word. I can't marry you. I love Pan. I've loved him always. It would be a sin to marry you now."

"*Hellsfire!*" shrieked Hardman. "You're as bad as that hussy who threw me down for him. I'll fix you, Lucy Blake. And I'll put your cowthief father behind the bars for life."

Pan leaped at Hardman and struck him a body blow that sent him tumbling out of his saddle to thud on the ground. The frightened horse ran down the path toward the gate.

"You dirty-mouthed cur," said Pan. "Get up, and if you've got a gun—throw it."

Hardman laboriously got to his feet. The breath had been partly knocked out of him.

"I'm—not—packing—my gun," he panted heavily. "You saw—that—Pan Smith."

"Well, you'd better pack it after this," replied Pan with contempt. "Because I'm liable to throw on you at sight."

"I'll have—you—run—out of this country," replied Dick huskily.

"Bah! don't waste your breath. Run me out of this country? Me! Reckon you never heard of Panhandle Smith. *You* and your crooked father, and your two-bit pardner of a sheriff would do well to leave this country. Savvy that! Now get out of here pronto."

Hardman gave Pan a ghastly stare and wheeled away to stride down the path. He passed out of sight among the trees in search of his horse.

Pan stood gazing down the green aisle. He had acted true to himself. It meant the spilling of blood. He knew it—accepted it—and made no attempt to change the cold passion deep within him. Lucy—his mother and father would suffer. But wouldn't they suffer more if he did not confront this conflict as his hard training dictated? He was almost afraid to turn and look at Lucy. Just a little while before he had promised her forbearance. So his amaze was great when she faced him, violet eyes ablaze, to clasp him.

"Panhandle Smith!" she whispered, gazing up into his face. "I heard your story. It thrilled me. But I never

understood—till you faced Dick Hardman. Oh, Pan, you have saved me from ruin."

Chapter Eight

Arizona Calling

"SEE here," said Pan seriously, yielding to an urge he could not resist. "Wouldn't it be wise for us to—to get married at once?"

Lucy blushed furiously. "Pan Smith! Are you crazy?"

"Reckon I am," he replied ruefully. "But I got to thinking how I'll be out after wild horses—and I'm afraid something might happen. Please marry me this afternoon?"

"Pan! You're—you're terrible," cried Lucy, and snatching away her hand, scarlet of face she rushed into the house ahead of him.

He followed, to find a slim young girl, with freckles, grave sweet eyes, and curly hair, standing by a window. She turned and devoured him with those shy eyes.

"Alice! Little sister!" he exclaimed. "Well, by golly, this is great."

It did not take long for Pan to grasp that a subtle change had come over his mother and father. Not the excitement of his presence nor the wonder about Lucy accounted for it, but a difference, a lessening of strain, a relief. Pan sensed a reliance upon him that they were not yet conscious of.

They went into the little whitewashed kitchen, where Pan had to stoop to avoid the ceiling, and took seats at the table. Pan feasted his eyes. His mother had not been idle during the hours that he was out in the orchard with Lucy, nor had she forgotten the things that he had always liked. Alice acted as waitress, and Bobby sat in a high chair beaming upon Pan.

At that juncture Lucy came in. She had changed her gray blouse to one of white, with wide collar that was cut a little low and showed the contour of her superb figure. She had put her hair up. Pan could not take his eyes off her. In hers he saw a dancing subdued light, and a beautiful rose color in her cheeks.

"Well, I've got to eat," said Pan, as if by way of explanation and excuse for removing his gaze from this radiant picture.

Thus his homecoming proved to be a happier event than he had ever dared to hope for.

"Dad, let's go out and have a talk," proposed Pan, after dinner.

As they walked down toward the corrals Pan's father was silent, yet it was clear he labored with suppressed feeling.

"All right, fire away," he burst out at last.

"Dad, I've a big job on my hands, and I think I'm equal to it. Are you going to oppose me?"

"Hell, no!" spat out his father. "Son, I lost my cattle, my ranch. An' then my nerve. I'm not makin' excuses. I just fell down—but I'm not too old to make another start with you to steer me."

"Good!" replied Pan with strong feeling, and he laid a hand on his father's shoulder. They halted by the open corral. "Then let's get right down to straight poker."

"Play your game, Pan. I'm sure curious."

"First off then—we don't want to settle in this country."

"Pan you've called me right on the first hand," declared his father, cracking his fist on the corral gate. "I know this's no country for the Smiths. But I followed Jard Hardman here, I hoped to—"

"Never mind explanations, Dad," interrupted Pan. "We're looking to the future. We'll go to Arizona. I had a pard who came from Arizona. All day long and half the night that broncobuster would rave about Arizona. Well, he won me over. Arizona must be wonderful."

"But, Pan, isn't it desert country?"

"Arizona is every kind of country. It's a big territory, Dad. Pretty wild yet, too, but not like these mining-claim countries. Arizona is getting settlers in the valleys where there's water and grass. Lots of fine pine timber that will be valuable someday. I know just where we'll strike for. But we needn't waste time talking about that now. If it suits you the thing is settled. We go to Arizona."

"Fine, Pan," said his father rubbing his hands. "*When* will we go?"

"That's to decide," answered Pan thoughtfully. "I've got some money. Not much. But we could get there and start on it. I believe, though, that we'd do better to stay here—this fall anyway—and round up a bunch of these wild horses. Five hundred horses, a thousand, at twelve dollars a head—why, Dad, it would start us in a big way."

"Son, I should smile it would," returned Smith, with fiery enthusiasm. "But can you do it?"

"Dad, last night I fell in with two cowboys—Blinky Moran and Gus Hans. They're chasing wild horses, and want me to throw in with them. Now with you and maybe a couple of more riders we can make a big drive. You've got to know the tricks. I learned a heap from a Mormon wild-horse wrangler. If these broomtails are as thick here as—well, I don't want to set your hopes too high. But wait till I show you."

"Pan, there's ten thousand wild horses in that one valley across the mountain there. Hot Springs Valley they call it."

"Then, by George, we've got to take the risk," declared Pan decisively.

"Risk of what?"

"Trouble with that Hardman outfit. It can't be avoided. I'd have to bluff them out or fight them down, right off. Dick is a yellow skunk. Jard Hardman is a bad man, treacherous. And his henchman, this two-bit of a sheriff, he's no man to face you on the square. I'll swear he can be bluffed. Has he any reputation as a gun thrower?"

"Matthews? I never heard of it. But he brags a lot. He's been in several fracases here, with drunken miners an' Mexicans. He's killed a couple of men since I've been here."

"Ah-huh, just what I thought," declared Pan. "I'll bet he hasn't any law papers from the territory, or government, either. Jard Hardman will be the hard nut to crack. Now, Dad, back in Littleton I learned what he did to you. And Lucy's story gave me another angle on that. It's pretty hard to overlook. I'm not swearing I can do so. But I'd like to know how you feel about it."

"Son, I'd be scared to tell you," replied Smith in a husky voice.

"You needn't, Dad. We'll stay here till we catch and sell a bunch of horses. Can you quit your job at the wagon shop?"

"Any time—an', Lord, won't I be glad to do it," returned Smith fervently.

"Well, you quit just then," remarked Pan dryly. "So much is settled. Dad, I've got to get Jim Blake out of that jail."

"I reckon so. It might be a job an' then again it mightn't. Depends on Jim. An' between you an' me, Pan, I've no confidence in Jim."

"That doesn't make any difference. I've got to get him out and send him away. Head him for Arizona, where we're going. Is it a real jail?"

" 'Dobe mud an' stones," replied his father. "A real man could break out of there any night. There are three guards, who change off every eight hours. One of them is a tough customer. Name's Hill, used to be an outlaw. The other two are lazy loafers round town."

"Where is this calaboose?"

"You passed it on the way out, Pan. Off the road. Gray flat buildin'. Let's see. It's the third place from the wagon shop, same side."

"All right, Dad," said Pan with cheerful finality. "Let's go back to the house and talk Arizona to Lucy and Mother for a little. Then I'll rustle along toward town. Tomorrow you come over to the boys' camp. We've got horses to try out and saddles to buy."

Chapter Nine

Pan Punches a Jaw

PAN came abreast of the building that he was seeking. It was part stone and part adobe, heavily and crudely built, with no windows on the side facing him. Approaching it, and turning the corner, he saw a wide-arched door leading into a small stone-floored room. He heard voices.

In a couple of long strides Pan crossed the flat threshold. Two men were playing cards, a bottle of liquor and small glasses on the table between them. The one whose back was turned to Pan did not see him, but the other man jerked up from his bench, then sagged back with strangely altering expression. He was young, dark, coarse, and he had a bullet hole in his chin.

This was Handy Mac New, late of Montana, a cowboy who had drifted beyond the pale. He was one of that innumerable band whom Pan had helped in some way or other. Handy had become a horse thief and a suspected murderer in the year following Pan's acquaintance with him.

"Howdy, men," Pan greeted them, giving no sign that he had recognized Mac New. "Which one of you is on guard here?"

"Me," replied Mac New. Slowly he got to his feet.

"You've got a prisoner in there named Blake," went on Pan. "I once lived near him. He used to play horse with me and ride me on his back. Will you let me talk to him?"

"Why, shore, stranger," replied Mac New, with nervous haste, and producing a key, he inserted it in the lock of a heavy whitewashed door.

Pan found himself ushered into a large room with small iron-barred windows on the west side. This was a luxurious kind of a prison house. There were many Indian blankets and rugs on the floor, an open fireplace with cheerful blaze, a table littered with books and papers, a washstand, a comfortable bed upon which reclined a man smoking and reading.

"Somebody to see you, Blake," called the guard, and he went out, shutting the door behind him.

Blake sat up. As he did so, Pan's keen eye espied a bottle on the floor.

Pan approached leisurely. Blake was very much better cared for there than could have been expected. Why?

"Howdy, Blake. Do you remember me?" asked Pan.

He did not in the least remember Lucy's father in this heavy blond man, lax of body and sodden of face.

"Somethin' familiar aboot you," replied Blake, studying Pan intently. "But I reckon you've got the best of me."

"Pan Smith," said Pan shortly.

"Wal!" he ejaculated, and slowly he rose to hold out a shaking hand. "Bill's kid—the little boy who stuck by my wife—when Lucy was born."

"Same boy, and he's damn sorry to find you in this fix," responded Pan forcefully. "And he's here to get you out."

Blake sagged back as slowly as he had arisen. His face changed like that of a man suddenly stabbed, and he dropped his head.

"Mr. Blake, I've been to see Lucy," went on Pan, and swiftly he talked of the girl, her unhappiness, and the faith she still held in her father. "I've come to get you out of here, for Lucy's sake. We're all going to Arizona. You and Dad can make a new start in life."

"My God, if I only could," groaned the man.

Pan reached out with quick hand and shook him. "Listen," he said low and eagerly. "How long is this guard Mac New on duty?"

"Mac New? The fellow outside is called Hurd. He's on till midnight."

"All right, my mistake," went on Pan swiftly. "I'll be here tonight about eleven. I'll have a horse for you, blanket, grub, gun, and money. I'll hold up this guard Hurd—get you out some way or other. You're to ride away. Take the road south. Make for Siccane, Arizona."

"Siccane, Arizona," echoed Blake, as a man in a dream of freedom.

"Yes, Siccane. Don't forget it. Stay there till we all come."

The door opened behind Pan.

"Wal, stranger, reckon yore time's up," called the jailer.

Pan gave the stunned Blake a meaning look, and then without a word, he left the room. The guard closed and locked the door. Then he looked up, with cunning, yet not wholly without pleasure. His companion at the card game had gone.

"Panhandle Smith!" whispered the guard.

"Shake, Mac," said Pan in a low voice. "It's a small world."

"By Gord, it shore is," replied Mac New, wringing Pan's hand. "I'm known here as Hurd."

"Ah-huh. Well, Hurd, I'm not a talking man. But I want to remind you that you owe me a good turn."

"You shore don't have to remind me of thet," returned the other.

"It pays to do good turns. I'm lucky, old-timer."

"I savvy, Panhandle Smith," said Hurd with gleaming eyes, and he crooked a stubby thumb toward the door of Blake's jail.

"All right, cowboy," returned Pan, with a meaning smile. "I'll drop around tonight about eleven."

Pan went into Black's store to look at the saddle Moran had recommended. It was a bargain and Pan purchased

it on sight. While he was there, he bought a Winchester carbine and a saddle sheath for it. Thus burdened, he walked out to the camp.

Lying Juan had supper about ready and the boys were noisy up at the corral. Some of their language was indicative of trouble and mean horses. Pan found a seat by the fire. Darkness had just about merged from dusk when the boys dragged themselves in, smelling of dust and horses. They went into the water basins like ducks. Pan lighted the lantern and put it on the table. Then the boys came straddling the bench like cowboys mounting horses.

"Wal, if heah ain't ole Pan Smith," announced Blinky vociferously. "Gus, take a peep at him. I'll bet he's got hold of a grand hoss. Nothin' else could make him look like thet."

"No. I just got back my girl," replied Pan gaily.

"Gurl! Say, you didn't run foul of thet little Yellow Mine kid?"

"Eat your supper, you hungry-looking galoot," replied Pan. "And you too, Gus. Because if I begin to shoot off my chin now you'll forget the grub."

Thus admonished, and with curious glances at Pan, the cowboys attacked the generous meal Juan had set before them. Pan did not seem to be hungry, which fact caused Juan much concern.

"Ahuh! It's the way a feller gets when he's in love with a gurl," observed the keen Blinky. "I been there."

After supper they got together before the stove and rolled their cigarettes. Pan spread his palms to the heat.

"Wal, pard, throw it off your chest before you bust," urged Blinky.

"What kind of a day did you boys have?" countered Pan, with a laugh.

"Good an' bad," replied Gus. "Some hoss thieves have been runnin' off our stock. We had some fine hosses, not broke yet. Some we wanted to keep."

"What's the good news?"

"Pan, I'll be doggoned if we didn't see a million broomies today," burst out Blinky.

"No. Now, Blink, talk sense," remonstrated Pan. "You mean you saw a thousand?"

"Wal, shore a million is stretchin' it some," acknowledged the cowboy. "But ten thousand wouldn't be nothin'. We tracked some of our hosses twenty miles an' more over heah, farther'n we'd been yet. An' climbed a high ridge to look down into the purtiest valley I ever seen. Twice as big as Hot Springs Valley. Gee, it laid there gray an' green with hosses as thick as greasewood bushes on the desert. Thet valley hasn't been drove yet. It's purty rough gettin' up to where you can see. An' there's lots of hosses closer to town. Thet accounts."

"Blinky, is this talk of yours a leaf out of Lying Juan's book?" asked Pan incredulously. "It's too good to be true."

"Pan, I'll swear it on a stack of Bibles," protested Blinky.

"For onct Blinky ain't out of his haid," corroborated Hans. "Never saw so many wild hosses. An' if we can find a way to ketch some of them we'll be rich."

"Boys, you told me you'd been trapping horses at the water holes," said Pan.

"Shore, we've been moonshinin' them," replied Blinky. "We build a corral round a water hole. Make a wide gate we can shut quick. Then we lay out on moonlight nights waitin' for 'em to come in to drink. We've done purty darn good at it, too."

"That's fun, but it's a two-bit way to catch wild horses," rejoined Pan.

"Wal, they're all doin' it thet way. I figgered myself it was purty slow, but no better way come to me. Do you know one?"

"Do I? Well, I should smile. I know more than one. Back on the prairie where it's all wide and bare there's no chance for a small outfit. But this is high country, valleys, canyons, cedars. Boys, we can make one big stake before the other outfits get on to us."

"By gosh, one's enough for us," declared Blinky. "Then we can shake this gold-claim country where they steal your empty tin cans an' broken shovels. But, Pan, how aboot this gurl?"

Briefly then Pan told his story. The response of these cowboys was what he had expected, warmhearted, simple, elemental.

"Then you're both with me?" asked Pan tersely. "I hesitated to draw you into a scrap that'll almost sure go to gun throwing."

"Wal, we're your pardners now, an' damn proud of it, Panhandle Smith."

Silently and grimly they all shook hands on it.

The night of the sabbath was no barrier to the habitués of the Yellow Mine. But early in the evening it was not yet in full swing. The dance was on with a few heavy-footed miners and their gaudy partners, and several of the gambling-tables were surrounded.

Pan stalked about alone. His cowboy friends had been instructed to follow him unobtrusively. Pan was looking for Charley Brown, but he had a keen roving eye for every man in sight. It was doubtful if Hardman or Matthews could have espied Pan first, unless they were hidden somewhere. He took up a position, presently, behind one of the poker games, with his back to the wall, so that he had command of the room. A stiff game was in progress, which Pan watched casually. Blinky and Gus lounged around.

Gradually more men came in, the gaming-tables filled up, and the white-armed girls appeared to mingle with the guests.

Pan espied Louise. She appeared to be more decently clad, a circumstance that greatly added to her charm, in his opinion. Curiously he studied her. Women represented more to Pan than to most men he had had opportunity to meet or observe. So it was natural he had compassion for this dance-hall, gambling-lure girl. She was pretty in a wild sort of way, dissolute, abandoned, yet not in any sense weak. A terrible havoc showed in her face for anyone with eyes to see beneath the surface. Pan noted a strange restlessness in her. She could not sit or stand still. Her hawklike eyes did not miss anyone there, and finally they located him. She came around the tables up to Pan, and took hold of his arm.

"Howdy, Handsome," she said, smiling up at him.

Pan doffed his sombrero and bade her good evening.

"Didn't I warn you not to come back?"

"Yes, but I thought you were only fooling. Besides I *had* to come."

"Why? You don't fit here. You've got too clean a look."

Pan gazed down at her, feeling in her words and presence something that prompted him to more than kindliness and good nature.

"Louise, I can return the compliment. You don't fit here."

"*Damn you!*" she flashed. "I'll fall in love with you."

"Well, if you did, I'd sure drag you out of this hell," replied Pan bluntly.

"Come away from these gamblers," she demanded, and drew him to seats at an empty table. "I've been hearing about you."

"That so? Who told you?"

"I overheard Dick Hardman tonight, just before supper. He has a room next to mine in the hotel here, when he stays in town. He was telling his father about you. Such cussing I never heard. I'm giving you a hunch. They'll do away with you."

"Thanks. Reckon it's pretty fine of you to put me on my guard."

"I only meant behind your back. What has Dick against you?"

"We were kids together back in Texas. Just natural rivals and enemies. But I hadn't seen him for years till last night. Then he didn't know me."

"He knows you now all right. He ran into you today?"

"I reckon he did," replied Pan with a grim laugh.

"Panhandle, this is getting sort of warm," she said, leaning across the table to him. "I'm not prying into your affairs. But I could be your friend. God knows I like a *man*."

"That's the second compliment you've paid me tonight. What're you up to, Louise?"

"See here, cowboy, when I pay any two-legged hombre compliments you can gamble they are sincere."

"All right, no offense meant."

"I've got you figured right when I say you're in trouble. You're *looking* for someone?"

"Yes."

"I knew it," she retorted, snapping her fingers. "And that's Hardman and his outfit. I didn't hear all Dick said. When he talked loud he cussed. But I heard enough to tie up Panhandle Smith with this girl Lucy and the Hardman outfit."

Pan eyed her steadily. "Louise, you show that you'd risk taking a chance on me—a stranger," he replied with quick decision. "I return that compliment."

The smile she gave him was really a reward.

"Who's this girl, Lucy?" she queried.

"She's my swwetheart, ever since we were kids," returned Pan with emotion. "I went to riding the ranges, and, well, like so many cowboys, I didn't go back home. When I did go Lucy was gone, my family was gone. I trailed them here—to find that Dick Hardman was about to force Lucy to marry him."

"The —— —— ——!" she burst out. Then after her excitement cooled: "How'd he aim to force her?"

Quickly Pan explained the situation as related to Jim Blake.

"Aha! That's where Jard Hardman and Matthews come in. Panhandle, they're a dirty outfit—and the dirtiest of them is Dick Hardman!"

"What's he to you, Louise?" inquired Pan gravely. "I can't see you in love with him."

"In love with Dick Hardman?" she whispered hotly. "My God! I wouldn't soil even my hands on him—if I didn't have to. He met me in Frisco. He brought me to this damned stinking rough hole. He made me promises he never kept. Not to marry me—don't get the wrong hunch. He has double-crossed me. And I *had* to sink to this! Yes, sure I was drunk. Don't you

understand I have to be drunk to stand this life? I'm not drunk now because you got here early. Something deep must be behind my meeting you, Panhandle Smith."

"I hope to heaven it will be to your good—as I know meeting you will be to mine," replied Pan fervently.

"We're off the track," she broke in. "I despise Dick Hardman. He's stingy, conceited, selfish. He's low down, and he's sinking to worse."

"His father ruined mine," Pan told her. "That's what brought Dad out here—to try to get something back from Jard Hardman. No use. He only got another hard deal."

"That cowboy who was in here with you last night—Blinky Moran. His claim was jumped by Hardman."

"Louise, how'd you know that?" asked Pan in surprise.

"Don't give me away. Blinky told me. He's one of my friends and he's a white man if I ever saw one. He has been in love with me. Wanted me to marry him! Poor crazy boy! I sure had to fight—and get drunker—to keep from more than liking him. He spent all his money on me and I had to make him quit."

"Well, that little bowlegged cowboy liar! He's as deep as the sea."

"Keep it secret, Panhandle," she responded seriously. "I don't want to hurt his feelings—To get back to the Hardmans: they've taken strong hold here. The old man owns half of Marco. He's in everything. But it's my hunch I'm giving you—that he's in the straight deals only to cover the crooked ones. That's where the money is."

"Yet Jard Hardman will not square up with Dad!" exclaimed Pan.

"Now tell me why you come into the Yellow Mine. You're taking an awful chance. Every night or so some tipsy miner gets robbed or knifed or shot."

"Louise, in dealing with men of really dangerous quality your only chance is to face them with precisely the same thing. As for the fourflushers like Matthews and men of the Hardman stamp, the one thing they can't stand is nerve. They haven't got it. They don't understand it. They fear it. They begin to figure on what the nervy man means to do before they do anything. If I did not show myself in the street, and here, the Hardman outfit would soon run true to their deals. So by appearing to invite and seek a fight I really avoid one."

"So that's why they call you Panhandle Smith?" queried the girl, meditatively. "I mean with the tone old man Hardman used. They call me Angel. But that doesn't mean what it sounds, does it?"

"I can't figure you, Louise," replied Pan dubiously.

"I'm glad you can't—Hello, there's Blinky and his pard Gus. And there! Hardman and Matthews, coming from behind the bar. There's a private office in behind. Panhandle, let me tell you Hardman seldom shows up here."

Pan leisurely got to his feet. His eye quickly caught Matthews's black sombrero, then the big ham of a face, with its drooping mustache. Matthews's companion was a stout man, bearded, dressed like a prosperous rancher.

"Louise, is that man with Matthews the gentleman we have been discussing?" asked Pan.

"That's the rich fat bloated —— —— ——," replied the girl. "You don't talk straight, Panhandle."

"I'm not quite so free as you are with bad language," replied Pan, smiling down on her. Then with deft

movement he hitched his belt round farther forward on his hip. The girl grasped its meaning. She turned white under her paint.

"Cowboy, what're you going to do?" she whispered, reaching for him.

"I don't know exactly." Pan moved leisurely toward the bar and the two men standing rather apart from the crowd. He halted within six feet of both men. He faced a man of about fifty years of age, rather florid of complexion, well fed and used to strong drink.

"Excuse me," spoke Pan, with most consummate coolness. Apparently he did not see Matthews. "Are you Jard Hardman?"

"Reckon I am, if that's any of your business," came a gruff reply. Light, hard, speculative eyes took Pan in from head to feet.

"Do you recognize me?" asked Pan.

"No, sir, I never saw you in my life," retorted Hardman with vehemence. And he turned away.

Pan made a step. His long arm shot out, and his hand, striking hard on Hardman's shoulder, whirled him round.

"My name's Smith," called Pan, in a vibrant, loud voice that stilled the room. "Panhandle Smith!"

"I don't know you, sir," replied Hardman, aghast and amazed. He began to redden. He turned to Matthews.

"Well, you knew my dad—to his loss," declared Pan. "And that's my business with you."

"You've no business with me," fumed Hardman.

"Reckon you're mistaken," went on Pan easily. "I'm Bill Smith's boy. And I mean to have an accounting with you on that old cattle deal."

These deliberate words, heard by all within earshot, caused a dead quiet throughout the room. The bartenders quit, the drinkers poised glasses in the air, the voices suddenly hushed. Pan had an open space behind him, a fact he was responsible for. He faced Matthews, Hardman, and then the length of the bar. He left the gamblers behind to Blinky and Gus, who stood to one side.

"You upstart cowpuncher!" presently shouted Hardman. "Get out of here or I'll have you arrested."

"Arrest me! What for? I'm only asking you for an honest deal. I can prove you cheated my father out of cattle. You can't arrest me for that."

Hardman guffawed boisterously. "Get out of here with your insolent talk about cattle deals."

"I won't get out. You can't put me out, even if you do own the place."

"I'll—I'll—" choked Hardman, his face growing purple under his beard. Then he turned to Matthews. "Throw this drunken cowboy out."

That focused attention upon the sheriff. Pan read in Matthews's eyes the very things he had suspected. And he laughed in Matthews's face.

"Bah! Hardman, you're backed by the wrong man. And at last you've run into the wrong man. Haven't you sense enough to see that? You cheated my father. Now you're going to make it good."

Hardman, furious and imperious, never grasped the significance that had frozen Matthews. Yielding to rage, he yelled at Pan.

"Bill Smith sicked his cowpuncher on me, hey? Like father, like son! You're a rustler breed. I'll drive you—"

Pan struck Hardman a terrible blow in the face. Like something thrown from a catapult he went into the crowd

next the bar, and despite this barrier and the hands grasping at his flying arms he crashed to the floor. But before he fell Pan had leaped back in the same position he had held in front of Matthews.

"He lied," cried Pan. "My dad, Bill Smith, was as honest a cattleman as ever lived. Mr. Sheriff, do you share that slur cast on him?"

"I don't know Bill Smith," replied Matthews hastily. "Reckon I'm not talkin' ag'in men I don't know. An as I'm not armed I can't argue with a gun-packin' cowboy."

Thus he saved his face with the majority of those present. But he did have a gun. Pan knew that as well as if he had seen it.

"Ah-huh!" ejaculated Pan sardonically. "All right. Then I'll be looking for you to arrest me next time we meet."

"I'll arrest you, Panhandle Smith, you can gamble on thet," declared Matthews harshly.

"Arrest nothing," replied Pan with ringing scorn. "You're a four-flush sheriff. I'll gamble you elected yourself. I know your kind, Matthews. And I'll gamble some more that you don't last long in Marco."

This was, as Pan deliberately intended, raw talk that any man not a coward could not swallow. But Matthews was a coward. That appeared patent to all onlookers. Whatever prestige he had held there in that rough mining community was gone, until he came out to face this fiery cowboy with a gun. White and shaking, he turned to the men who had gotten Hardman to his feet. They led him out the open door and Matthews followed.

Pan strode back to the table where Louise sat tense and wide-eyed. The hum of voices began again, the clatter of glasses, the clink of coin.

"Well, little girl, I had them figured, didn't I?" asked Pan, calling a smile to break his tight cold face.

"I don't—know what—ails me," she said breathlessly. "I see fights every night. And I've seen men killed—dragged out. But this got my nerve."

"It wasn't much to be excited about. I didn't expect any fight."

"Your idea was to show up Hardman and Matthews before the crowd. You sure did. The crowd was with you. And so am I, Panhandle Smith." She held out a slim hand.

Chapter Ten

Quiet Morning

As Pan sauntered out into the street, he heard the jangle of spurs behind him. Blinky and Gus covering his rear! Presently, beyond the circle of yellow light, they joined him, one on each side.

"Wal, Pan, I was shore in on thet," said Blink, gripping Pan's arm.

"Say, you called 'em flat. Made 'em swaller a hell of a lot," added Gus. "When it come down to hardpan they wasn't there."

"Pan, you remember me tellin' you aboot Purcell, who jumped my claim with young Hardman?" queried Blinky. "Wal, Purcell was there, settin' some tables back of where you made your stand. I made it my particular biz to get close to him. He was pullin' his gun under the table when I kicked him. An' when he looked up he seen somethin', you can bet on thet. Wal, Purcell is one man in Hardman's

outfit we'll have to kill. Gus will back me up on thet."

"I shore will. Purcell's a Nevada claim jumper, accordin' to talk."

"Point Purcell out to me the first chance you get," replied Pan. "Don't figure I expect to bluff everybody. It can't be done. Somebody will try me out—if only to see what I can do. That's the game, you know."

"Hell, yes. An' all you got to do, Pan, is to be there first."

"That girl Louise gave me a hunch," said Pan thoughtfully. "Struck me she was square. Blink, you've talked to her, of course?"

"Me? Aw! Couple of times. I reckon. Bought her drinks. She won't look at me unless she's drunk," replied Blink, both confused and gloomy.

"You've got Louise figured wrong, cowboy," returned Pan. "I'll prove it to you sometime. Now let's get down to business, and plan Blake's release from jail . . ."

About ten o'clock they set out with a horse into the black night, working along the base of the slope. No stars showed, and the raw wind hinted of rain or snow. The lights of the town shone dimly.

Descending the slope required careful, slow work. The incline was steep, of soft earth and loose shale. But Blinky knew where to feel his way, and eventually they reached the flat, to find easier progress. Blinky made a detour, and finally, as they gradually approached several lamplights, far apart, he whispered, "You wait heah. I ain't so darn shore which one of them lights comes from the jail."

Pan waited what seemed a long while. At last he heard steps, then made out an object blacker than the black background.

"Found the jail easy, but got off comin' back. Pronto now. Must be near eleven."

Pan kept the dark silent moving form in sight. The dim light grew larger. Then the low flat building loomed up faintly in the dense gloom.

"Go ahead," whispered Blinky. "I'll hold the hoss."

Pan went swiftly up to the wall, and thence along it to the corner. The light came from an open door. He listened. There was no sound. Luckily Hurd was alone. Pan slipped round the corner and entered. Hurd sat at the table in the flare of a lamp, turned down low.

"Ha! Was waitin' fer you, an' beginnin' to worry," he said.

"Plenty of time, if Blake's all ready," replied Pan.

"I'm givin' you a hunch. He's damn queer fer a feller who expects to break jail."

"No matter. Let's get at it, pronto."

Hurd got up, and laid his gun on the table. Then he turned over the bench, threw papers on the floor. "Thar's the key, an' heah's a rope. Hawg-tie me."

With that he turned his back. Swiftly Pan bound him securely, and let him down upon the floor. Then he unlocked the door, opened it. Pitch darkness inside and no sound! He called in low voice. Blake did not reply. Muttering in surprise, Pan took the lamp and went into the room. He found Blake asleep, though fully dressed. Pan jerked him roughly out of that indifferent slumber.

"It's Smith," he said bluntly. "You sure must *want* to get out—Damn you, Blake, this whole deal looks fishy to me! Come on."

Leaving the lamp there, Pan dragged the man out, through the dark en-

trance room, into the night. In another moment they had reached the horse and Blinky.

"Here's money and a gun," whispered Pan swiftly. "You'll find grub, blanket, grain on your saddle. Get on!" Pan had to half lift Blake upon the horse. He felt of the stirrups. "They're all right. The road is that way, about fifty yards. Turn to the left and ride. Remember—Siccane."

Blake rode away into the darkness without a word. Pan watched and listened. Presently he heard the hard clip-clp of hoofs on the road, making to the left.

"Good! He'll ride past where Lucy's sleeping. I wish she could know," muttered Pan.

"Was he drunk?" queried Blinky, in a hoarse whisper. "Shore acted funny fer a sober man."

"He didn't breathe like he was drunk," replied Pan. "But he flabbergasted me. Found him asleep! And he never said a darned word. Blink, it sticks in my craw. Reckon he didn't want to leave that nice warm bed."

"Ahuh! Wal, let's rustle back to our warm beds."

Morning dawned bright and sparkling after the night's rain. The air was keen and crisp.

"Wal, reckon this heah'll be our busy day," drawled Blinky, after making a hearty breakfast of bacon and flapjacks. "Pan, what's first on the ticket?"

"Show me a horse, you bowlegged grub destroyer."

"Come out to the corral. We got a sorrel as is a real shore-enough hoss if you can ride him."

There were a dozen or more horses in the corral. It developed presently that Pan could ride the sorrel. How good to be back in the saddle! Pan wanted to ride down at once to show Lucy his first mount west of the Rockies. If all went well he could go to his mother's for dinner. Meanwhile he must meet the exigencies here in Marco.

"Wal, what's next on the ticket?" queried Blinky.

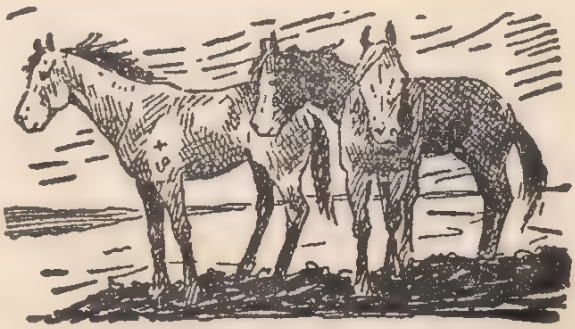
"I'm going downtown," replied Pan.

"Ahuh! I want to trail along with you."

"No, I'll go alone. I'll make my bluff strong, Blinky, or draw Matthews out. Honest, I don't think he'll show."

"Thet yellow dawg? He won't face you, Pan. But he's in thet Hardman outfit, an' one of them—mebbe Purcell—might take a shot at you from a winder. Let me go with you."

"Well, if they're that low-down your being with me wouldn't help much," replied Pan. "I'll tell you, Blink. Here's how I figure. Matthews is no fool. He couldn't risk murdering me in broad daylight, from ambush. You and Gus pack up for the wild-horse drive. We ought to get off in the morning. One of you ride out to see if Charley Brown will throw in with us. I'll see Dad at dinner. It may turn out we can get our jailer friend, Hurd. Wonder if he lost his job. Ha! Ha! Well, boys, I'll know more when I see you again."



Pan strolled toward town. A familiar unpleasant mental strain dominated his consciousness. His slow, cool, easy nonchalance was all outward. He was a keen-strung, watching, listening machine.

Two men stood in front of the stage office. One was Smith, the agent. Pan approached them, leaned on the hitching-rail. But he favored his right side and he faced the street.

"Mornin', cowboy," Smith greeted him, not without nervousness. "See you're down early to git arrested."

"Howdy, Smith. Can you give me a drink?" returned Pan.

"Sorry, but I haven't a drop."

The other man was an old fellow, and his boots and clothes showed the stain and wear of mining.

"Tell you, cowboy," he spoke up dryly, "you might buy a bottle at the Yellow Mine."

Pan made no reply, and presently the old man shambled away while Smith entered his office. Pan kept his vigil there, watching, waiting. He was seen by dozens of passing men, but none of them crossed toward the stage office. Down the street pedestrians halted to form little groups. In an hour the business of Marco had apparently halted.

Its citizens, the miners who had started to work, the teamsters, Mexicans, cowboys who happened upon the street, suddenly struck attitudes of curious attention, with faces turned toward Pan. They too were waiting, watching.

The porch of the Yellow Mine was in plain sight, standing out on a corner, scarcely more than a hundred yards down the street. Pan saw Hardman and Matthews come out of the hotel. They could not fail to observe the absence of movement, the waiting knots of men.

This was the climax of strain for Pan. Leisurely he strolled away from the hitching-rail, out into the middle of the street, and down.

Hardman could be seen gesticulating, stamping as if in rage; and then he went into the hotel, leaving Matthews standing alone. Other men, in the background, disappeared. The sheriff stood a moment irresolute, sagging, with his pale hamlike face gleaming. Then he wheeled to enter the hotel.

He had damned himself. He had refused the even break.

Pan saw this evasion with grim relief. The next move was one easier to perform, though fraught with great peril. Every man in Marco now knew that Pan had come out to meet the men he had denounced. They had seen him sauntering down the middle of the street. And they had showed what the West called yellow. But they had not showed their claws, if they had any.

As Pan proceeded slowly down the middle of the street the little groups of spectators disintegrated, and slipped out of sight. Those farthest from him moved on to halt again. And when any neared the Yellow Mine, they scurried completely out of sight. Pan had the main street to himself. For a few moments not a single man showed himself. Then they began to reappear behind him out of range, slowly following him.

At the entrance to the Yellow Mine, Pan mounted the steps. The big saloon was vacant except for the two bartenders, and a Mexican sweeping out the sawdust. Pan had heard subdued voices, the shuffle of feet, the closing of doors. Every muscle in his body was cramped with tension, ready to leap

like lightning into action. Advancing to the bar, he called for a drink.

"On the house this mawnin'," replied the nearest bartender, smiling. He showed a little nervousness with his hands. Pan took the bottle with his left hand, poured out some liquor, set the bottle down, and lifted the glass. He had his drink. His tension relaxed.

"Sort of quiet this morning," he said.

"Reckon it is, just now," replied the bartender significantly.

"Reckon I might as well move along," remarked Pan, but he did not stir. Sounds of footsteps came from outside. Presently Pan walked back through the open door, then halted a moment, to light a cigarette. His back was turned to the bar and the doors. That seemed the climax of his effrontery. It was deliberate, the utter recklessness of the cowboy who had been trained in a hard school. But all that happened was the silence breaking to a gay, sweet voice:

"Call again, cowboy, when there's somebody home!"

Louise had been watching him through some secret peephole. That had been her tribute to him and her scorn of his opponents. It about closed the incident, Pan concluded. Men were now coming along the street in both directions.

Pan retraced his steps up the street, finding, as before, a clear passage. Men hailed him from doorways, from windows, from behind obstructions. He did not need to be told that they were with him. Pan was quick to grasp the mood of these residents who had been so keen about his endeavor to draw out Hardman and Matthews. That hour saw the beginning of the end for these dominant factors in the evil doings of Marco.

By the time Pan got back to camp his mood actually harmonized with his leisurely, free, and careless movements. Still he was hiding something, for he wanted to yell. Blinky saw him coming and yelled for him. The cowboy was beside himself with a frenzy of delight.

"How's the pack job? All done?" queried Pan.

"Pack hell! We plumb forgot," replied Blinky. "What you think—you—you—"

Blinky failed to find adequate words to express his sentiments. Gus was quiet as usual, but he too showed relaxation from a severe ordeal.

"Well, let's get at it now," suggested Pan. "I'll start you boys on it, then ride down to Mother's."

In the succeeding hour, what with sundry trips down to the store, the trio learned some news that afforded much satisfaction. Jim Blake had assaulted a guard and broken jail. No doubt he must have had outside assistance. According to rumor, Matthews accused Hurd, the guard, of being party to the escape, and had discharged him. Sentiment in town was not equally divided. Almost everybody, according to the informers, was glad Blake had escaped. It developed that the jail was not a civic institution. Already there had been talk of the permanent citizens getting together.

All this was exceedingly welcome to Pan. He could hardly wait till noon to saddle the sorrel, to ride over to his mother's.

"Aw, cowboy, hug thet gurl fer me!" sang Blinky. "Shore she's put the devil in you. An' this heah outfit is steppin' high!"

On the way out to the farm, Pan met his father rushing up the road. At sight of Pan he almost collapsed.

"Just—heard—the news," he panted, as Pan reined in the sorrel.

"What news, Dad?" queried Pan.

"Bill Dolan an' his—boys—stopped at the ranch to—tell me," replied Smith, wiping his clammy face. "Bill saw you take that walk down main street. Pan, is it true that you accused Jard Hardman of robbin' me—an' you knocked him flat?"

"Sure it's true."

"Lord, but I'd like to have seen that," declared Smith vehemently. "An' sōn, you got Jim Blake out of jail. It was sure great. If only Jim does his part!"

"You doubt that, Dad?"

"Shore do. But I'll tell you, Pan. If we could be with Jim all the time we could pull him up."

"Let's hope he's far on the way to Siccane by now. Does Lucy know? I hope you didn't tell her about my meeting with Hardman and Matthews?"

"I didn't. But Bill shore did," replied his father. "Reckon I would have squealed, though. Say, boy, you should have seen Lucy."

"I will see her pronto," replied Pan eagerly. "Come on. What're you holding me up for, anyhow?"

Pan walked the horse while his father kept pace alongside.

"Some more news I 'most forgot," Smith went on. "Bill told about a shootin' scrape out in Cedar Gulch. Them claim jumpers drove a miner named Brown off his claim. They had to fight for it. Brown said he wounded one of 'em. They chased him clean to Satlee's ranch. Shore wanted to kill him or scare him off for good."

"I know Brown," replied Pan. "And from what he told me I've a hunch I know the claim jumpers. I'll hunt Brown up and persuade him to make the wild-horse drive with us. He's—"

"By George, I forgot some more," interrupted Smith, slapping his leg. "Bill said Wiggate broke with Jard Hardman. Wiggate started this wild-hoss buyin' an' shippin' east. Hardman had to get his finger in the pie. Now Wiggate is a big man an' he has plenty of money. I always heard him well spoken of. Now I'll gamble your callin' Jard Hardman the way you did had a lot to do with Wiggate's break with him."

"Shouldn't wonder," rejoined Pan. "And it's darned good luck for us. The boys ran across a valley full of wild horses over here about twenty miles. Dad, I believe I can trap several thousand wild horses."

"No!" ejaculated his father.

"If the boys aren't loco, I sure can."

"I can vouch for numbers myself," replied Smith. "An I've not a doubt in the world but that there valley's not yet hunted. But to ketch the darned scooters, that's the hell of it! Pan, even a thousand head would give me a new start somewhere."

"It's as good as done. Before the snow flies we will be on the way south to Siccane."

Lucy waved to Pan as he came down the road. Then she disappeared in the green foliage. Arriving at the gate he went in. He expected to see her. But she had disappeared. He hurried toward the house, looking everywhere. The girl, however, was not to be seen.

Bobby was occupied with little wooden playthings on the porch. Pan's gay shout to him brought forth his mother, but no Lucy.

He mounted the porch to embrace his mother.

"Where's Lucy? She was at the gate. Waved to me."

"Lucy ran through the house like a whirlwind," replied his mother, with a smile. "The truth is, my son, she has been quite beside herself since she heard of her father's release from jail. She *knew* you got him out. 'Mother, he laughed at me—at my fears. He said it'd be easy to free Dad.' So she knows, Pan, and I rather think she didn't want us to see her when she meets you. You'll find her in the orchard or down by the brook."

"All right, Mother, I'll find her," replied Pan happily. "We'll be in to dinner pronto. There's a lot to talk about."

Pan did not seek Lucy in the orchard. Leaping upon the sorrel, he loped down the sandy hard-packed path toward the brook and the shady tree with its bench. Pan knew she would be there. Dodging the overhanging branches he kept peering through the aisles of green for a glimpse of white or a golden head. Suddenly he was rewarded. Lucy stood in the middle of the sunny glade.

Pan rode to her side and leaped from the saddle. Her face was pale and wet with tears. But her eyes were now dry, wide and purple, radiant with gladness. She rushed into his arms.

Chapter Eleven

Wild Horse Valley

BEFORE dark that night Pan had most of his preparations made, so that next morning there would be nothing to do but eat, pack the horses, saddle up, and ride.

At supper time Charley Brown and Mac New, alias Hurd, called at the camp. The latter was a little the worse for the bottle. Charley was sober, hard, gloomy.

The outcome of that visit was the hiring of both men to go on the wild-horse drive. Brown's claim had been jumped by strangers. It could not be gotten back without a fight. Brown had two horses and a complete outfit; Mac New had only the clothes on his back.

Brown had an interesting account to give of his meeting with Dick Hardman down at Yellow Mine. The young scion of the would-be dictator of Marco fortunes had been drunk enough to rave about what he would do to Panhandle Smith. Some of his maudlin threats, as related by Brown, caused a good deal of merriment in camp, except to Blinky, who grew perfectly furious.

"Hey, cowboy, are you goin' to stand fer thet?" he queried belligerently.

Pan tried to laugh it off, but Blinky manifestly had seen red at the mention of Dick Hardman's name. He was going over to the Yellow Mine and pick a fight.

Drawing the irate cowboy aside Pan inquired kindly and firmly, "It's because of Louise that you want to pick a fight with Dick?"

"Naw," replied Blinky, averting his face.

"Don't you lie to me, Blinky," went on Pan earnestly, shaking the cowboy. "I've guessed your trouble and I'm your friend."

"Wal, Pan, I'm darn glad an' lucky if you're my friend," said Blinky, won out of his sullenness. "But what trouble are you hintin' aboot?"

Pan whispered, "You're in love with Louise."

"What if I am?" hissed Blinky in

fierce shame. "Are you holdin' thet ag'in me?"

"No, I'm damned if I don't like you better for it."

That was too much for Blinky. He gazed mutely up at Pan, as a dog at his master. Pan never saw such eyes of misery.

"Blinky, that girl is full of hellfire. But that's only the drink. She couldn't carry on that life without being drunk. There's something great about that little girl. I felt it, Blink. I liked her. I told her she didn't belong there. I believe she could be made a good woman. Why don't you try it? I'll help you."

"But Louise won't ever see me unless she's drunk," protested Blinky.

"That's proof. She doesn't want you wasting your time and money at the Yellow Mine. She thinks you're too good for that—when she's sober. Talk straight now, Blink. You do love her, bad as she is?"

"So help me I do!" burst out the cowboy abjectly. "It's purty near killed me. I'm so sorry fer her I cain't stand it. Dick Hardman fetched her out heah from Frisco. He never cared nothin' fer her an' she hates him. She swears she'll cut his heart out. An' I'm afraid she'll do it. Thet's why I'd like to stick a gun into his belly."

"Marry Louise. Take her away. Come south with us to Arizona," replied Pan persuasively.

"My Gawd, pardner," whispered Blinky huskily. "Would you let us go with you?"

"Sure. Why not? Lucy and my mother know nothing about Louise. Even if they did they wouldn't despise a poor girl you and I believe is good at heart and has been unfortunate."

"But Louise won't marry me."

"If we can't talk her into it when she's sober, by heaven we'll get her drunk. Now, Blink, it's settled. Forget it. We'll go out and do the hard-riding stunt of our lives. We'll sell horses. With some money we can figure on homes far from this bitter country—*homes*, cowboy, with cattle and horses—some fine open grassy rolling country—where nobody ever heard of Blinky Moran and Panhandle Smith."

"Pard, it ain't—my—right name, either," mumbled Blinky. "From now on you can call me Somers—Frank Somers. I'm proud of the name, but I reckon it was ashamed of me."

"Ah-huh! All right, Blink Somers," replied Pan cheerfully. "You'll always be Blink to me."

Next morning they ate standing and sitting before the campfire. Then swift hands and lean strong arms went at beds and packs, horses and saddles. When dawn broke the hunters were on their way.

Blinky was first, leading a pack horse. Pan followed next, and the other four men strung out behind, with bobbing pack horses between. This ridge was the high ground between Marco Valley and Hot Springs Valley. Soon the trail led down, and it was dusty. The rising sun killed the chill in the air, and by the time the hunters had reached level ground again it was hot. From above, Pan had espied a green spot fifteen miles or more down the valley. A number of dust devils were whirling around it.

"What's that, Blink?" Pan had asked, pointing.

"Thet's Hot Springs, an' the dust comes from wild hosses comin' in to drink."

They rode across the valley, which appeared to be five or six miles wide,

to begin ascending another slope. Up and up the hunters climbed, once more into the cedars. Pan had another view of Hot Springs and the droves of wild horses.

"Blink, there must be lots of horses water there."

"Yep. Three thousand or more at this time of year. Many more later, when the droves get run out of the high country by man. An' you see Hardman's outfit has been chasin' them hosses fer two months. They're shore purty well boogered."

"Are many of them branded?"

"Darn few," replied Blinky. "Not more'n five or six in a hundred. These wild hosses haven't been worth ketchin' until lately. Most all broomtails. But now an' then you shore see a bunch of dandy mustangs, with a high-steppin' stallion."

They climbed and crossed that ridge. Another valley, narrow and rough, not so low as the last, lay between this ridge and the next one, a cedared rise of rock and yellow earth that promised hard going. Beyond it rose the range of mountains, black and purple, and higher still, white peaked into the blue. They called to Pan. This was wild country, and even to see it in the distance was satisfying.

This narrow valley also showed some wild-horse bands, but not many, for there appeared to be scant grass and water. These horses were going or coming, all on a trot, but when they sighted the hunters they would halt stock-still. Soon a stallion trotted out a hundred paces or more, snorted and whistled, then taking to his heels he led his band away in a cloud of dust.

The water which they had come to drink was not very good, according to Pan's taste. This was his first experience with hot alkali water. It came out almost boiling, too hot to drink, but a few rods from the spring it cooled off.

The spring was surrounded by low trees. While the hunters watered there, Pan espied another herd of wild horses that trooped in below, and drank from the stream. He counted ten horses, mostly blacks and bays. The leader was a buckskin, and Pan would not have minded owning him. The others were not bad looking, of fair size, weighing around a thousand pounds, but they showed inbreeding. After they had drunk their fill they pawed the mud and rolled in the water, to come up most unsightly beasts. Pan let out a loud yell. Swift as antelopes the horses swept away.

All the saddle horses, and even some of the pack animals, were affected by the scent of the wild herd. Freedom still lived deep down in their hearts. That was why a broken horse, no matter how gentle, became the wildest of the wild when he got free.

Pan had been right in his judgment of the lay of the land on the next ridge. Climbing it was difficult. The summit was covered with piñons and cedars, growing in heavy clumps around outcropping of ledges. It was rather a wide-topped ridge, and not until Pan had reached an open break on the far side could he see what kind of country lay beyond.

"Wal, there she is, my wild-hoss valley," said Blinky, who sat his horse alongside of Pan. "An' by golly, thet's the name for her—Wild Hoss Valley. Hey, pard?"

Pan nodded. In truth he had been rendered quite speechless by the wildness and beauty of the scene below and beyond him. A valley that had some of the characteristics of a canyon yawned beneath, so deep and wide that it appeared like a blue lake, so long that he could only see the north end, which notched under a rugged mountain slope, green and black and golden and white according to the successive steps toward the heights.

The height upon which he stood was the last of the ridges, for the elevation that lay directly across was a noble range of foothills, timbered, canyoned, apparently insurmountable for horses. Gray cliffs stood out of the green, crags of yellow rock mounted like castles.

But it was the blue floor of the valley that longest held Pan's enraptured gaze. Grass and sage! What were the innumerable colored rocks or dots that covered the whole floor of the valley? Pan wondered. Then he did not need to ask. They were wild horses!

"Aw, Blink! This'll be hard to leave!" he expostulated.

"You bet your sweet life it will," agreed Blinky. "But we cain't hang up heah, moon-eyed, an' ravin'. We're holdin' up the outfit an' it's a long way down to water."

"Have you picked out a place where we'll be away—out of sight?"

"Wal, I'm no wild-hoss wrangler like you say you are, but I've got hoss sense," drawled Blinky, as he urged his animal back into the trail.

Pan dismounted to walk, a habit he had always conformed to on steep trails. Then he gazed across the open gulf to the mountains. These were not like the Rockies he knew so well, the great white-crowned and sky-piercing peaks of Montana. These belonged more to the desert, were wilder, with more color, not so lofty, and as ragged as jagged rock and fringed timber could make them. Gradually, as he descended the trail, this range dropped back out of his sight.

At near the sunset hour, when the journey was ended, Pan had to compliment Blinky on the beautiful place to which he had guided them. It was isolated, and singularly fitted to their requirements. The slope they had descended ran out into an immense buttress jutting far into the valley. A low brushy arm of the incline extended out a half mile to turn toward the main slope and to break off short, leaving a narrow opening out into the valley. The place was not only ideal for a hidden camp site, with plenty of water, grass, wood, but also for such a wild-horse trap as Pan had in mind.

"How wide is that gap?" asked Pan.

"Reckon it cain't be more'n the length of two lassos," replied Blinky.

"Rope it off high, boys, and turn the stock loose. This corral was made for us."

They set to work, each with self-assumed tasks that soon accomplished the whole business of pitching camp. Suppertime found them a cheerful, hungry, hopeful little band.

Dusk settled down into this neck of the great valley. The rosy afterglow of sunset lingered a long time. A tiny stream of swift water sang faintly down over rocks. And before darkness had time to enfold hollow and slope and horizon, the moon slid up to blanch the hills with silvery light.

Interrogation by Pan brought out the fact that Blinky had never been down this trail at all. It had been as unknown to him as to Pan.

"Luck!" burst out Pan when the circumstance became clear. "Say, Blink, if your horse would jump you off a cliff you'd come up with Queen Victoria on your arm!"

Lying Juan now broke into the conversation.

"Yes, yes, I was over to her place two, t'ree times," he began. "I drive en to many horse to her ranch. You bet I sell some damn good horse to Queen Victorie. I can tell you myself Queen Victorie is a fine little woman I ever seen on my life. She make big a dance for me when I never seen so much supper on my life. I dance with her myself an' she look ata me an' say, 'Juanie, I never dance lika this en my life till I dance with you.' "

Pan, the only one of Juan's listeners who had power of speech left, asked, "Did you play poker with the queen?"

"You bet. She playa best game of poker I ever seen on my life an' she won t'ree hun'red dollar from me."

Whereupon Pan succumbed to the riotous mirth.

Most of the talk, however, invariably switched back to the burning question of the hour—wild horses. Pan explained, "It all depends on the lay of the land—I mean the success of a big drive. If round the corner here there's good running-ground—well, it'll be great for us. We'll size up the valley for horses. Find where they water and graze. If we decide to use this place as a trap to drive into we'll throw up two blind corrals just inside that gateway out there. Then we'll throw a fence of cedars as far across the valley as we can drag cedars. The farther the better. When that's done we'll go up the valley, get behind the wild horses, and drive them down."

Blinky cast an admiring eye upon Pan. "Shore I've got 'dobe mud in my haid fer brains," he said with disgust. "Simple as apple pie, an' I never onct thought of ketchin' wild hosses thet way."

"Blink, that's because you never figured on a wholesale catch," replied Pan. "We want at least a thousand head in one drive."

"Aw! Aw! Pan, don't work my hopes to believin' thet," implored Blinky, throwing up his hands.

"Son, I'm cryin' for mercy too," added Pan's father.

Lying Juan found this an admirable opening.

"My father was big Don in Mexico. He hada t'ree t'ousand *vaqueros* on our *rancho*. We chase wild horse many days, more horse than I ever see on my life. I helpa lass' more horse than I ever see on my life. I make t'ree t'ousand peso by my father's *rancho*."

"Juan, I pass," declared Pan. "You've got my hand beat. Boys, let's unroll the tarps. It has been a sure-enough riding day."

Chapter Twelve

Blind Corrals

PAN'S father was an early riser, and next morning he routed everybody out before the morning star had gone down in the velvet blue sky. Before breakfast, he climbed the steep end of the bluff between camp and the valley. Upon his return he was so excited over the number of wild horses

which he claimed to have seen that Pan feared he had fallen victim to Lying Juan's malady.

"I hope Dad's not loco," said Pan. "I'll climb that bluff, too, and see for myself. Then we'll ride out into the valley, get the lay of the land, and find the best place for our trap."

Blinky accompanied Pan to the ridge, which they climbed at a point opposite camp. Four or five hundred feet high, it provided a splendid prospect of the valley. Pan could scarcely believe his eyes. He saw wild horses—so many that for the time being he forgot the other important details. He counted thirty bands in a section of the valley no more than fifteen miles long and less than half as wide. These were individual bands, keeping to themselves, each undoubtedly having a leader.

Blinky swore lustily in his enthusiasm, evidently thinking of the money thus represented. But to Pan it meant much more than fortune; horses had been the passion of his life. Cattle had been only beef, hoofs, horns to him. Horses he loved. Naturally then, wild horses would appeal to him with more thrill and transport than those that acknowledged the mastery of man.

The beautiful wild-horse panorama beneath Pan swelled his heart. He gazed and gazed. From near to far the bands dotted the valley. Near at hand the colors were easily distinguishable. Blacks and bays, whites and chestnuts, pintos that resembled zebras dotted this wild pasture land. The closest band could not have been more than a mile distant, in a straight line. A shiny black stallion was the leader of this herd. He was acting strangely, too, trotting forward and halting, tossing his head and long black mane.

"Stallion!" exclaimed Pan, pointing. "What a jim-dandy horse! Blink, he has spotted us, sure as you're born. Talk about eyesight!"

"Wal, the broomtailed son-of-a-bronc!" drawled Blinky. "Reckon, by gosh, you're correct."

"Blink, I'll bet he's game and fast."

"Wal, you're safe to gamble on his bein' fast, anyways."

"Didn't you ever really *care* for a horse?" queried Pan.

"Me? Hell, no! I've been kicked in the stummick—bit on the ear—piled into the mud—drug in the dust too darn often."

"You'll admit, though, that there are some fine horses among these?"

"Wal, Pan, to stop kiddin' you, now an' then a feller sees a real hoss among them broomies. But shore them boys are the hard ones to ketch."

The last of Blinky's remark forced Pan's observation upon the cardinally important point—the lay of the land.

"Blink, see that deep wash running down the valley? That's a break in the valley floor, all right. It may be a wonderful help to us, and it may ruin our chances."

"Reckon we cain't tell much from heah. Thet's where the water runs, when there is any. Bet it's plumb dry now."

"We'll ride out and see. But I'm almost sure it's a deep wide wash, with steep walls. Impassable! And by golly, if that' so—you're a rich cowboy. Now let's work along this ridge, down to where Dad went."

Brush and cactus, jumbles of sharp rocks, thickets of scrub oak and clumps of dwarf cedars, all matted along the narrow hog-back, as Blinky called it, made progress slow and tedious. At length, however, Pan and Blinky ar-

rived at the extreme end of the cape-like bluff. It stood higher than their first lookout.

Pan, who arrived at a vantage point ahead of Blinky, let out a stentorian yell. "Look!"

The steep yellow slope opposite them, very close at the point where the bluff curved in, stretched away almost to the other side of the valley. Indeed it constituted the southern wall of the valley, and was broken only by the narrow pass below where the cowboys stood, and another wider break at the far end. From this point the wash that had puzzled Pan proved to be almost a canyon in dimensions. It kept to the lowest part of the valley floor and turned to run parallel with the slope.

"Blink, suppose we run a fence of cedars from the slope straight out to the wash. Reckon that's two miles and more. Then close up any gaps along this side of the valley. What would happen?" suggested Pan.

"You doggone wild-hoss wrangler!" Blinky ejaculated, with a healthy grin. "Shore I begin to get your hunch. Big corrals hid behind the gate under us—long fence out there to the wash—close up any holes on this side of valley—then make a humdinger of a drive—Cowboy, shore's you're born I'm seein' my Arizona ranch right this minnit!"

"Reckon I'm seeing things too," agreed Pan in suppressed excitement. "I said once before it's too good to be true. Blink, is there *any* mistake?"

"What about?"

"The market for wild horses."

"Absolutely, no," declared Blinky vehemently. "It's new. Only started last summer. Wiggate made money. He said so. Thet's what fetched the Hardmans nosin' into the game. Mebbe this summer will kill the bizness, but right now we're safe. We can sell all the hosses we can ketch, right heah on the hoof, without breakin' or drivin'. We can sell at Marco or we can drive to the railroad. I'd say sell at ten dollars a haid right heah an' whoop."

"I should smile," replied Pan. "It'll take us ten days or more, working like beavers, to cut and drag the cedars to build that fence. Then all we've got to do is drive the valley. One day will do it. Why, I never saw or heard of such a trap. You can bet it will be driven only once. The wild horses we don't catch will steer clear of this valley. But breaking a big drove, or driving them to Marco—that'd be a job I'd rather dodge. It'd take a month, even with a small herd."

"Hardman an' Wiggate have several outfits working, mebbe fifty riders all told. They've been handlin' hosses. Reckon Wiggate would jump at buyin' up a thousand haid, all he could get. He's from St. Louis an' what he knows aboot wild hosses ain't a hell of a lot. I've talked with him."

"Blinky, we've got the broomies sold. Now let's figure on catching them," replied Pan joyfully. "And we'll cut out a few of the best for ourselves."

"An' a couple fer our lady friends, hey, pard!" added Blinky.

Down the steep slope, through brush and thickets, they slid like a couple of youngsters on a lark. Pan found the gateway between bluff and slope even more adaptable to his purposes than it had appeared from a distance. The whole lay of the land was miraculously advantageous to the drive and the proposed trap.

"Oh, it's too darn good," cried Pan incredulously. "It'll be too easy. It makes me afraid."

"Thet somethin' unforeseen will happen, huh?" queried Blinky shrewdly. "I had the same idee."

"But what could happen?"

"Wal, we'll do all the cuttin' an' draggin' an' buildin'. We close up any gaps. We'll work ourselves till we're daid in our boots. Then we'll drive—drive them wild hosses as hosses was never drove before."

"Well, what then?" queried Pan sharply.

"Drive 'em right in heah where Hardman's outfit will be waitin'!"

"My God, man, such a thing couldn't happen."

"Wal, it just could," drawled Blinky, "an' we couldn't do a damn thing but fight."

"Fight?" repeated Pan passionately.

"Thet's what I said, pard. An' it would be one hell of a fight, with all the best of numbers an' guns on Hardman's side."

"Say," said Pan broodingly, "you've given me a shock. I never thought of such a possibility. I see now it *could* happen, but the chances are a thousand to one against it."

"Shore. It's hardly worth guessin' aboot. But there's thet one chance. All we can do, Pan, is gamble."

On the way back to camp, Pan, pondering very gravely over the question, at last decided that such a bold raid was a remote possibility, and that his and Blinky's envisioning such a thing came from their highly excited imaginations.

At camp Pan announced, "Now men—we're ready to look the valley over. I'll take Dad with me. Blink, you and Gus turn the corner here and keep close under the slope all the way up the valley. Look out for places where the wild horses might climb out. Charley, you and Mac New cross to the other side of the valley, if you can. Look the ground over along that western wall. And everybody keep eyes peeled for wild horses, so we can get a line on numbers."

When they rode back into the gateway the day was far spent, and the west was darkly ablaze with subdued fire.

Pan's father showed his unfamiliarity with long horseback rides and he made sundry remarks, mirth-provoking to his son.

"I'll make a cowboy and horse wrangler of you again," threatened Pan.

By the time Lying Juan had supper ready Blinky and Gus rode into camp.

"Well, what's the verdict?" asked Pan, with a smile.

"We seen most five thousand hosses, an' I'll be doggoned if I don't believe we'll ketch them all."

"You found this side of the valley a regular hole-proof wing for our trap, I'll bet."

"Wal, there's places where hosses could climb out easy, but they won't try it," replied Blinky. "The valley slopes up long an' easy to the wall. But when we drive them hosses they'll keep down in the center, between the risin' ground an' thet wash. They'll run far past them places where they could climb out. I shore lose my breath whenever I think of what's comin' off. I reckon the valley is a made-to-order corral."

"Blink, you have some intelligence after all," replied Pan chaffingly. "Did you see any sign of Brown and Mac New?"

"Not after we separated this mawnin'. An' thet reminds me, pard, I've got somethin' to tell you. This feller Hurd

—or Mac New as you call him—has a pocketful of gold coin."

"How do you know?"

"Gus kicked his coat this mawnin', over there where Mac New had his bed, an' a pile of gold eagles rolled out. Just by accident. Gus wanted somethin' or other. He was plumb surprised, an' he said Mac New was plumb flustered. Now what you make of thet?"

"By golly, Blink, I don't know. There's no reason why he shouldn't have some money, yet it strikes me queer. How much gold?"

"Aw, two or three hundred easy," rejoined Blinky. "It struck me sort of queer, too. I recollected thet he told us he'd only been doin' guard duty at the jail fer a couple of months. An' Gus recollected how not long before Mac New went to work he'd been a regular grub-line runner. We fed him heah, or Juan did. Now, pard, it may be all right an' then again it mayn't. Are you shore aboot him?"

"Blink," returned Pan, much perturbed, "Mac was an outlaw in Montana. Maybe worse. Anyway I saved him one day from being strung up. That was on the Powder River, when I was riding for Hurley's X Y Z outfit. They were a hard lot. And Mac's guilt wasn't clear to me. Anyway, I got him out of a bad mess, on condition he'd leave the country."

"Ahuh! But it's a shore gamble he's one of Hardman's outfit now, same as Purcell."

"Reckon he was. But he got fired."

"Thet's what *he* says."

"Blink, you advise me not to trust Mac New?" queried Pan dubiously.

"I ain't advisin' nobody. If you want my opinion, I'd say, now I know what you done fer Mac New, thet he wouldn't double-cross you. When it comes down under the skin there ain't much difference between outlaws an' other range men in a deal like thet."

"Well, I'll trust him just because of that feeling I can't explain," returned Pan.

He did not, however, forget the possible implication. It was after dark when Mac New and Brown rode into camp.

"We had to ride clean to the end of the valley to cross that wash," said Brown. "It's rough country. Horses all down low. Didn't see so many, at that, until we rimmed around way up on this side."

"Fine. You couldn't have pleased me more," declared Pan. "Now, Mac, what do you say about our prospects? You've chased wild horses."

"It'll be most as bad as stealin' hosses," replied the outlaw laconically. "Easy work an' easy money."

"Say, you won't think it's easy work when you get to dragging cedars down that hill in the hot sun all day. I don't know anything harder."

Early next morning the labor began and proceeded with the utmost dispatch. The slope resounded with the ring of axes. Pan's father was a capital hand at chopping down trees, and he kept two horsemen dragging cedars at a lively rate. The work progressed rapidly.

With three cutters and three riders dragging cedars, allowing for a rest of an hour at noon the fence grew to a length of a quarter of a mile from the slope.

"Not so good," declared Pan, when they left off work for the day. "But that fence is high and thick."

It was a tired, sweaty and dust-begrimed party that descended upon Lying

Juan for supper. After their hearty meal they gathered round the campfire to smoke and talk. Mac New joined the group, and though he had nothing to say he listened attentively and appeared to fit in more. Pan was aware of how the former outlaw watched him. The conversation, of course, centered round the plan and execution of work, and especially the wonderful drive they expected to make.

Next day they did not go back to the fence, but worked at the gateway on the blind corrals. Pan constructed the opening to resemble a narrow aisle of scrub oak. By sunset one corral had been almost completed. It was large enough to hold a thousand horses. One third of it was fenced by the bluff.

Two more days were required to build the second blind corral, which was larger, and though it opened from the first it did not run along the bluff. As this one was intended for chasing and roping horses, as well as simply holding them, the fence was made an almost impenetrable mass of thick-foliaged cedars reinforced, where necessary, with stuffings of scrub-oak brush. Pan was so particular that he tried to construct a barrier which did not have sharp projecting spikes of dead branches sticking out to cut a horse.

In the succeeding days Pan paced up the work, from dawn until dark. A week more saw the long fence completed. It was an obstacle few horses could leap.

Following the completion of the fence, they built a barrier across the wash. And then to make doubly sure Pan divided his party into three couples, each with instructions to close all possible exits along the branches of the wash, and the sides of the slope.

During the latter part of this work, the bands of wild horses moved farther westward. But as far as Pan could tell, none left the valley.

The night that they finished, with two weeks of unremitting toil in dust and heat behind them, was one for explosive satisfaction.

"Fellers, my pard Panhandle is one to tie to," declared Blinky, "but excoose me from ridin' any range where he was foreman."

"Blink, you'll soon be cowboy, foreman, boss—the whole outfit on your own Arizona ranch."

"Pard, I'll shore drink to thet, if any body's got any likker."

If there were any other bottles in the camp, Mac New's was the only one that came to light. It was passed around.

"Now, men, listen," began Pan when they had found seats around the campfire. "It's all over but the shouting—and the riding. You listen too, Juan, for you've got to fork a horse and drive with us. As soon as it's light enough to see, we'll take the fresh horses we've been saving and ride across the valley. I want to come up behind all these bands of wild horses. Pack your guns and all the shells you've got. We'll take stands at the best place. Reckon that'll be about ten

miles west. You'll all see when we get there how the neck of the valley narrows down till it's not very wide. Maybe a matter of two miles of level ground, with breaks running toward each slope. We'll string across this, equal distances apart, and begin our drive.

"If we start well and don't let any horses break our line, we'll soon get them going and then each band will drive with us. Ride like hell, shoot and yell your head off to turn back any horses that charge to get between us. Soon as we get a few hundred moving, whistling, trampling and raising the dust, that'll frighten the bands ahead. They'll begin to move before they see us. Naturally as the valley widens we've got to spread. But if we once get a wide scattering string of horses running ahead of us we needn't worry about being separated. When we get them going strong, there'll be a stampede. Sure a lot of horses will fool us, but we ought to chase half the number on this side of the valley clear to our fence. That'll turn them toward the gate to the blind corrals. We'll close in there, and that'll take riding, my buckaroos!"

Blinky was the most obstreperously responsive to Pan's long harangue. Pan thought he understood the secret of the cowboy's strange elation. Blinky had been a homeless wandering range rider, a hard-drinking reckless fellow with few friends. The success of this venture, if it turned out so, meant that Blinky would do the one big act of his life. He would take the girl Louise from her surroundings, give her a name that was honest and a love that was great, and rise or fall with her.

The hunters stayed up later than usual, and had to be reminded twice by Pan of the strenuous morrow. When Pan made for his own bed Mac New followed him in the darkness.

"Smith, I'd like a word with you," said the outlaw.

"Sure, Mac, glad to hear you," replied Pan, not without a little shock.

"I've stuck on heah, haven't I?" queried Mac New.

"You sure have. I wouldn't ask a better worker. And if the drive is all I hope for, I'll double your money."

"Wal, I didn't come with you on my own hook," rejoined the other hurriedly. "Leastways it wasn't my idee. Hardman got wind of your hoss-trappin' scheme. Thet was after he'd fired me without my wages. Then he sent fer me, an' he offered me gold to get a job with you an' keep him posted if you ketched any big bunch of wild hosses."

Here the outlaw clinked the gold coin in his coat pocket.

"I took the gold, an' said I'd do it," went on Mac New deliberately. "But I never meant to double-cross you, an' I haven't."

"Thanks, Mac," returned Pan, extending his hand to the outlaw. "I wasn't afraid to trust you. Hardman's playing a high hand, then?"

"Reckon he is, an' thet's a hunch."

"All right, Mac. I'm thinking you're square with me," replied Pan.

After the outlaw left, Pan sat on his bed pondering this latest aspect of the situation. Hardman's attempt to bribe Mac New had a dubious look. Pan did not like it. If his wild-horse expedition had not reached the last day he would have sent Blinky back to Marco or have gone himself to see if Hardman's riders could be located. But it was too late. Pan would not postpone the drive, come what might.

Chapter Thirteen

Mustangs and Hot Lead

THE morning star was going down in an intense dark-blue sky when the seven men rode out upon their long-planned drive. They crossed the wash below the fence, where they had dug entrance and exit, and turned west at a brisk trot. Daylight came lingeringly. The valley cleared of opaque light.

In the eastern sky, over the far low gap where the valley failed, the pink light deepened to rose, and then to red. A disk of golden fire tipped the bleak horizon. The whole country became transformed as if with life.

It was seven o'clock when Pan and his men reached the western elevation of the valley, something over a dozen miles from their fence and trap. From this vantage point Pan could sweep the whole country with far-sighted eyes. What he saw made them glisten: wild horses everywhere, like dots of brush on a bare green rolling prairie!

"Boys, we'll ride down the valley now and pick a place where we split to begin the drive," said Pan.

"Hosses way down there look to me like they was movin' this way," observed Blinky, who had eyes like a hawk. "Hosses run around a lot of their own accord. An' ag'in they get scared of somethin'. If we run into some bunches haidin' this way we'll turn them back an' thet's work for us."

Pan called a halt there, and said, "We split here. Mac, you and Brown ride straight toward the slope. Mac, take a stand a half mile or so out. Brown, you go clear to the slope and build a fire so we can see your smoke. Give us five minutes, say, to see your smoke, and then start the drive. Reckon we'll hold our line all right till they get to charging us. And when we close in down there by the gate it'll be every man for himself. I'll bet it'll be a stampede."

Pan sent Lying Juan to take up a stand a mile or more outside of Mac New. Gus and Blinky were instructed to place equal distances between themselves and Juan. Pan's father rode to a ridge top in plain sight a mile away. Pan remained where he had reined his horse.

He could see about half of the valley floor which was to be driven. The other half lay over the rolling ridges and obscured by the haze and yellow clouds of dust rising here and there. Those dust clouds had not appeared until the last quarter of an hour or so, and they caused Pan curiosity that almost amounted to anxiety. Surely bands of horses were running.

Suddenly a shot rang out over Pan's left. His father was waving hat and gun. Far over against the green background of slope curled up a thin column of blue smoke. Brown's signal! In a few moments the drive would be on.

Pan got off to tighten cinches. "Well, Sorrel, old boy, you look fit for the drive," he said, patting the glossy neck. "But I'll bet you'll not be so slick and fat tonight."

When he got astride again he saw his father and the next driver heading their horses south. So he started Sorrel and the drive had begun. He waved his sombrero at his father. And he waved it in the direction of home, with a message to Lucy.

Pan rode at a trot. It was not easy to hold in Sorrel. He wanted to go. He

scented the wild horses. Soon Pan was riding down into one of the shallow depressions, the hollows that gave the valley its resemblance to a ridged sea. Thus he lost sight of the foreground. When, half a mile below, he reached a wave crest of ground he saw bands of wild horses, enough to make a broken line half across the valley, traveling toward him. They had their heads north, and were moving prettily, probably a couple of miles distant. Beyond them other bands, scattered and indistinct, but all in motion, convinced Pan that something had startled the horses, or they had sensed the drive.

"No difference now," shouted Pan aloud. "We're going to run your legs off, and catch a lot of you."

The long black line of horses broke into sections, and then into bands, most of which sheered to the left. But one herd of about twenty kept on toward Pan. He halted Sorrel. They came within a hundred yards before they stopped as if frozen.

A mouse-colored mare was leading this bunch. She whistled shrilly, and then a big roan stallion trotted out from behind. He jumped as if he had been struck, and taking the lead swung to Pan's left, manifestly to get by him. But they had to run uphill while Pan had only to keep to a level. He turned them before they got halfway to a point even with the next driver. Away they swept, running wild, the roan and mare leading, with the others massed behind, manes and tails flying.

Then Pan turned ahead again, working back toward his place in the driving line. He had a better view here. He saw his father and Gus and Blinky ride toward each other to head off a scattered string of horses. The leaders were too swift for the drivers and got through the line, but most of the several herds were headed and turned. Gunshots helped to send them scurrying down the valley.

Two small bands of horses appeared coming west along the wash. Pan loped Sorrel across to intercept them. They were ragged and motley, altogether a score or more. They had no leader and showed it in their indecision. Upon sighting Pan they wheeled in their tracks and fled like the wind, down the valley. Pan saw them turn a larger darker-colored herd. This feature was what he had mainly relied upon.

Again he lost sight of the horses and his comrades, as he rode down a long swell of the valley sea. The slope ahead was long and gradual, and it mounted fairly high. Pan was keen to see the field from that vantage point. Still he did not hurry. Any moment a band of horses might appear, and he wanted always to have plenty of spare room to ride across to left or right. Once they got the lead of him or even with him it would be almost impossible to turn them.

Not, however, until he had surmounted the next ridge did he catch sight of any more wild horses. Then he faced several miles of almost level valley, with the only perceptible slope toward the left. For the first time he saw all the drivers. They were holding a fairly straight line. As Pan had anticipated, the drive was slowly leading away from the wash, diagonally toward the great basin that constituted the bottom of the valley floor. Bands of horses were running south, bobbing under the dust clouds. There were none within a mile of Pan. The other men, beyond the position of Pan's father, would soon be called upon to do some riding.

As Pan kept on at a fast trot, he watched in all directions, expecting to see horses come up out of a hollow or over a ridge; also he took a quick glance every now and then in the direction of his comrades. They were working ahead of him, more and more to the left. Therefore a wide gap soon separated Pan from his father.

Suddenly, way over close to the wash Pan espied a string of horses emerging from the thin haze of dust. He galloped down and across to intercept them. As he drew closer he was surprised to see they were in a dead run. These horses were unusually wild, as if they had been frightened. They appeared bent on running Pan down, and he had to resort to firing his gun to turn them. Then after they had veered, he had to race back across a good deal more than his territory to keep them from going round him.

At last they headed back into the dusty-curtained, black-streaked zone which constituted the bowl of the valley. Pan found that Sorrel sighted wild horses more quickly than he, and wanted to chase them all.

Pan rode a mile to the left, somewhat uphill and also forward. He caught sight of his father, and two other riders, rather far ahead, riding, shooting either behind or in front of a waving pall of dust.

Pan had a front of two miles and more to guard, and the distance was increasing every moment. The drive swept down to the left, massing toward the apex where the fence and slope met. This was still miles away. Pan could see landmarks he recognized, high up on the horizon. Many bands of horses were now in motion. Pan wanted to stay out in the clear, so that he could see distinctly, but he was already behind his comrades. No horses were running up the wash. So he worked over toward where he had last observed his father, and gave up any attempt at further orderly driving.

It was plain that his comrades had soon broken the line. Probably in such a case, where so many horses were running, it was not possible to keep a uniform front. But Pan thought they could have done better. He saw strings of horses passing him to the left. They had broken through. This was to be expected. No doubt the main solid mass was now on a stampede toward the south.

Pan let stragglers and small bunches go by him. There were, however, no large bands of horses running back, at least that he could see. He rode to and fro, at a fast clip, across this dust-clouded basin, heading what horses happened to come near him. The melee of dust and animals thickened. He now heard the clip-clop of hoofs, here, there, everywhere, with the mass of sound to the fore. Presently he appeared surrounded by circles of dust and stringing horses. It was like a huge corral full of frightened animals running wild through dust so thick that they could not be seen a hundred feet distant. Pan turned horses back, but he could not tell how quickly they would wheel again and elude him.

Once he thought he saw a rider on a white mount. Then he decided he was mistaken, for none of Blinky's horses were white.

This melee down in the dusty basin was bad. Driving was hampered by the obscurity. Pan could only hope the main line of wild horses was sweeping on as it had started.

After a long patrol in the dust and heat of that valley flat, Pan emerged,

it seemed, into clearer atmosphere. He was working up. Horses were everywhere, and it was ridiculous to try to drive all those he encountered. At length there were none running back. All were heading across, to and fro, or down the valley. And when Pan reached the long ascent of that bowl he saw a magnificent spectacle.

A long black mass of horses was sweeping onward toward the gateway to the corrals, and to the fence. Dust columns, like smoke, curled up from behind them and swung low on the breeze. Pan saw riders behind them, and to the left. The many bands of horses, now converged into one great herd, were fully four miles distant. Pan saw his opportunity to cut across and down to the right toward where the fence met the wash. If the horses swerved he could head them off. To that end he gave Sorrel free rein and had a splendid run of several miles to the point halfway between the fence and the wash.

Here from a high point of ground he saw the black wheel-shaped mass of horses sweep down the valley like a storm. The spectacle was worth all the toil and time he had given, even if not one beast was captured. But Pan, with swelling heart and beaming eye, felt assured of greater success than he had hoped for. There were five thousand horses in that band, more by ten times than he had ever before seen driven. They could not all get through that narrow gateway to the corrals. Pan wondered how his few riders could have done so well. Luck! The topography of the valley!

"Looks like Dad and all the rest of them have swung round on this side," soliloquized Pan, straining his eyes.

That was good, but Pan could not understand how they had ever accomplished it. Perhaps they had been keen enough to see that the wild horses would now have to go through the gateway or turn south along the fence.

Pan watched eagerly. Whatever was going to happen must come very soon, as swiftly as those fast wild horses could run another mile. He saw them sweep down on the bluff and round it, and then begin to spread, to disintegrate. Again dust clouds settled over one place. It was in the apex. What a vortex of furious horses must be there! Pan lost sight of them for some moments. Then out of the yellow curtain streaked black strings, traveling down the fence toward Pan, across the valley, back up the way they had come. Pan let out a stentorian yell of victory. He knew the action indicated that the horses had poured in a mass into the apex between bluff and fence.

"*Whoopee!*" yelled Pan. "It's a sure bet we've got a bunch!"

Then he spurred Sorrel to meet the horses fleeing down along the fence. They came in bunches, in lines, stringing for a mile or more along the barrier of cedars.

Pan met them with yells and shouts. Frantic now, the animals wheeled back. But few of them ran up out of the winding shallow ground along which the fence had been cunningly built. He drove them back, up over the slow ascent, toward the great dusty swarm of horses that ran helter-skelter under the dust haze.

Suddenly Pan espied a black stallion racing toward him. He remembered the horse. And the desire to capture this individual took strong hold upon him.

At the most favorable moment Pan spurred Sorrel to intercept the stallion. But the black, maddened with terror and instinct to rage, would not, swerve out of Pan's way. On he came, swift as the wind, lean black head out, mane flying. Pan had to jerk Sorrel out of his way. Then Pan, having the black between himself and the fence, turned Sorrel loose. The race began—with Pan still holding the advantage. It did not, however, last long that way. The black ran away from Pan. What a stride! He was a big horse, too, ragged, rangy.

Knowing he could not catch the black, Pan cut across toward the wash. Then the stallion, seeing the yawning gulf ahead, turned toward the fence, and quickening that marvelous stride he made a magnificent leap right at the top of the obstruction. He cleared the heavy wood and crashed through the branches to freedom.

"You black son-of-a-gun!" yelled Pan in sheer admiration.

Dust-begrimed and wet, Pan once more headed toward the goal. Far as he could view in a fan-shaped spread, wild horses were running back up the valley. Pan estimated he saw thousands, but there were no heavy black masses such as had borne down on that corner of the valley.

He was weary, but he could have sung for very joy. Happily his thoughts reverted to Lucy and the future. He would pick out a couple of beautiful ponies for her, and break them gently. He would find some swift sturdy horses for himself.

The afternoon was half gone. As Pan neared the end of the fence, which was still a goodly distance from the gateway, he was surprised that he did not see any horses or men. The wide brush gates had been closed. Beyond them and over the bluff he saw clouds of dust, like smoke, rising lazily, as if just stirred.

"Horses in the corrals!" he exclaimed. "I'll bet they're full. Gee! now comes the problem. But we could hold a thousand head there for a week—maybe ten days. There's water and grass. Reckon, though, I'll sell tomorrow."

He would have hurried on but for the fact that Sorrel had begun to limp. Dismounting, Pan walked the rest of the way to the bluff, beginning to think it strange he did not see or hear any of his comrades. No doubt they were back revelling in the corrals full of wild horses.

Pan opened the small gate, and led Sorrel into the lane. Still he did not see anything of the men. He did hear, however, a snorting, trampling of many horses, over in the direction of the farther corral.

At the end of the bluff, where the line of slope curved in deep, Pan suddenly saw a number of saddled horses, without riders. With a violent start he halted.

There were men, strange men, standing in groups, lounging on the rocks, sitting down, all as if waiting.

A little to the left of these Pan's lightning swift gaze took in another group. His men! Not lounging, not conversing, but aloof from each other, lax and abject, or strung motionless!

Bewildered, shocked, Pan swept his eyes back upon the strangers.

"Hardman! Purcell!" he gasped, starting back as if struck.

Then his mind leaped to conclusions. He did not need to see Blinky approach him with hard, sullen face. Hardman and outfit had timed the wild-horse drive. No doubt they had participated in it, and meant to profit by that, or worse, they meant to claim the drive, and by superior numbers force that issue.

Such a terrible fury possessed Pan that he burned and shook all over. He made a dragging step to meet Blinky. But so great was his emotion that he had no physical control. He waited. An icy, sickening misery convulsed him for a moment. But that could not exist in the white heat of his wrath.

"Blink—Blink," whispered Pan hoarsely. "It's come! That damned hunch we feared, but wouldn't believe!"

"By Gawd, I—I couldn't hev told you," replied Blinky, just as hoarsely. "An' it couldn't be worse."

"Blink—then we made a good haul?"

"Cowboy, nobody ever heerd of such a haul. I say fifteen hundred haid. Your dad reckons two thousand."

"Fifteen hundred horses!" ejaculated Pan intensely.

"Pan, I wish to Gawd we hadn't ketched any," declared Blinky.

That brought Pan back to earth. "What's their game?" he asked swiftly, indicating the watching, whispering group.

"I had only a few words with Hardman. Your dad went out of his haid. Reckon he'd have done fer Hardman with his bare hands, if Purcell hadn't knocked him down with the butt of a gun."

Again there was a violent leap of Pan's blood. It jerked his whole frame. "Blink, did that big brute—?"

"He shore did. Your dad's got a nasty knock over the eye. No, I hadn't any chance to talk to Hardman. But his game's as plain as that big nose of his. Shore he'll grab our hosses, or most of them."

"You mean straight horse stealing?"

"Shore. But the hell of it is, Hardman's outfit helped make the drive. Thet's what galls me. Either they was layin' fer the day or just happened to ride up on us, an' figgered it out. Mebbe thet's where Mac New comes in."

"Blink, I don't believe he's double-crossed us," declared Pan stoutly. "So you think Hardman will claim most of our horses or take them all?"

"I shore do."

"Blink, if he gets *one* of our horses it'll be over my dead body. You fellows sure showed yellow clear through—to let them ride in here without a fight."

"Hellsfire!" cried Blinky, as if stung. "What you think? There wasn't a one of us thet had a single cartridge left fer our guns. Thet's where the rub comes in. We played their game. Wasted a lot of shells on them damn broomies! So how could we fight?"

"Ah-huh!" groaned Pan.

"Pan, I reckon you'd better swaller the dose, bitter as it is, an' bluff Hardman into leavin' us a share of the hosses."

"Say, man, are you drunk or loco?" flashed Pan scornfully. With that he whirled on his heel and strode toward where Hardman, Purcell, and another man stood apart from the lounging riders.

Slowly Blinky followed in Pan's footsteps, and then Mac New left the group in the shade of the wall, and shuffled out into the sunlight. His action was

that of a forceful man, dangerous to encounter.

As Pan approached, Purcell swung around square with his hands low, a significant posture. Hardman evinced signs of extreme nervous tension. The third man walked apart from them. All the others suddenly abandoned their lounging attitude.

"Hardman, what's your game?" queried Pan bluntly, as he halted.

Hardman swallowed hard and braced himself. "Game? There's no game about drivin' a million wild hosses through the dust. It was work."

"Don't try to twist words with me," replied Pan fiercely. "Do you mean a straight horse-thief deal? Or a share-and-share divvy on the strength of your riding in where you weren't asked?"

"Young man, I'm warnin' you not to call me a hoss thief," shouted Hardman, growing red under his beard.

"I'll call you one, damn quick, if you don't tell your game."

"We made the drive, Smith," returned Hardman. "You'd never made it without us. An' that gives us the biggest share. Say two-thirds, an' I'll buy your third at ten dollars a head."

"Hardman, that's a rotten deal," burst out Pan. "We planned this trap. We worked like dogs. And we made the drive. You might account for more horses trapped, but no difference. You had no business here. We can *prove* it."

"Wal, if I've got the hosses I don't care what *you* say," retorted Hardman, finding bravado.

It was no use to try to appeal to any sense of fairness in this man. Pan saw that. Coldly he eyed Hardman and then the dust-caked face of Purcell. He could catch only the steely speculation in Purcell's evil eyes.

Meanwhile Blinky had come up beside Pan and a moment later Mac New. Neither had anything to say, but their actions, especially Mac New's, were not to be misunderstood. The situation became intense.

"Jard Hardman, you're a low-down horse thief," said Pan deliberately.

The taunt, thrown in Hardman's face, added to the tension of the moment. His eyes stood out. He recognized at last something beyond his power to change or stop.

"Smith, reckon you've cause for temper," he said huskily. "I'll take half the hosses—an' buy your half."

"No! Not one damn broomtail do you get," returned Pan in a voice that cut. "Look out, Hardman! I can prove you hatched up this deal to rob me."

"How, I'd like to know?" blustered the rancher.

"Mac New can prove it—Hurd here. His real name is Mac New. You hired him to get in with me—to keep you posted on my movements."

Again Hardman showed his kind of fiber under extreme provocation: "Yes, I hired him—an' he's double-crossed you as well as me."

"Did he? Well, now *you* prove that," flashed Pan.

"Purcell here," replied Hardman hoarsely, "he's been camped below. Hurd met him at night—kept him posted on your work. Then, when all was ready for the drive Purcell sent for me. Ask him yourself."

"Mac, what do you say to that?" Pan queried sharply, but he never took his eyes off Purcell.

"*Hardman, you're a liar!*" roared Mac New. If ever Pan heard menace

in a voice, it was then. "*Take it back!* Square me with Panhandle Smith!"

"Mac, he doesn't have to square you. Anyone could see he's a liar," called Pan derisively.

"Hurd, I—I'll have you shot—I'll shoot you myself," burst out Hardman, wrestling his arm toward his hip.

A thundering report close beside Pan almost deafened him. Hardman uttered a loud gasp. Then fell heavily.

"Thar, Jard Hardman," declared the outlaw, "I had one bullet left." And he threw his empty gun with violence at the prostrate body.

Purcell's long taut body jerked into swift action. His gun spurted red as it leaped out. Pan, quick as he drew and shot, was too late to save Mac New. Both men fell without a cry, their heads almost meeting.

"Blink, grab their guns!" yelled Pan piercingly, and leaping over the bodies he confronted the stricken group of men with leveled weapon.

"Hands up! *Quick*, damn you!" he ordered fiercely.

His swiftness, his tremendous passion, following instantly upon the tragedy, had shocked Hardman's men. Up went their hands.

Then Blinky ran in with a gun in each hand. "Fork them hosses, you —— —— ——!" he yelled.

As one man, Hardman's riders rushed to mount their horses. Several did not wait for further orders, but plunged away down the lane toward the outlet.

"Rustle, hoss thieves," added Blinky. With quick strides he had gotten behind most of the riders. "Get out of heah!"

With shuffling, creaking of leather, and suddenly cracking hoofs the order was obeyed. The riders soon disappeared around the corner of the bluff.

Chapter Fourteen

Quick Turnover

THE hour was near sunset and the heat of day had passed. A cool light breeze made soft low sound in the trees.

Pan found his father sitting with bandaged head beside the campfire, apparently recovering somewhat from the daze caused by the shooting.

"Did you take a peep at our hosses?" he asked.

"No, not yet," replied Pan.

"We've got a big job ahead."

"That depends, Dad. If we can sell them here we haven't any job to speak of. How about it, Blink?"

"Shore thet all depends. If we sell heah, fine an' dandy. The other feller will have the hell. Reckon, though, we want to cut out a string of the best hosses fer ourselves. Thet's work, when you've got a big drove millin' round. Shore is lucky we built thet mile-round corral. There's water an' feed enough to last them broomies a week or longer."

While they were talking Gus and Charley Brown returned to camp, leading the horses that had been ridden by Hardman and Purcell.

"Turn them loose, boys," directed Pan.

Presently Gus handed Pan a heavy leather wallet and a huge roll of greenbacks.

"Found the wallet on Purcell an' the roll on Hardman," said Gus.

"Wal, they shore was well heeled," drawled Blinky.

"But what'll I do with all this?" queried Pan blankly.

"Pan, as you seem to forget Hardman owed your dad money, reckon you might rustle an' hunt up Dick Hardman an' give it to him. Say, Dick'll own the Yellow Mine now. Gee! He could spend all this in his own joint."

"Dad, you never told me how much Hardman did you out of," said Pan.

"Ten thousand in cash, an' Lord only knows how many cattle."

"So much! Say, Dad, will you take this money?"

"Yes, if it's honest an' regular for me to do so," replied Smith stoutly.

"Regular? There's no law in Marco. We've got to make our own laws. Let it be a matter of conscience," said Pan, tossing both wallet and roll to his father. "Here's to your new ranch in Arizona!"

Lying Juan soon called them to supper. It was not the usual cheery meal; the sudden terrible catastrophe of the day did not quickly release its somber grip.

After supper, however, there seemed to be a lessening of restraint, with the conversation turning to the corrals full of wild horses.

"Wal, let's go an' look 'em over," proposed Blinky.

Pan was glad to see his father able and eager to accompany them, but he did not go himself. He made his way along the north slope to a high point where he could look down into the second corral. It was indeed a sight to fill his heart—that wide mile-round grassy pasture so colorful with its droves of wild horses. Black predominated, but there were countless whites, reds, bays, grays, pintos. He saw a blue roan that shone among the duller horses, too far away to enable Pan to judge of his other points.

Later Pan lay awake in his blankets. He had retired early, leaving his companions continuing their arguments and speculations on the number of horses. The campfire flared up and died down, according to the addition of new fuel. At length there was only a dull red glow left, and quiet reigned. The men had sought their beds.

Then the solemn wilderness shut down on Pan, with the loneliness and solitude and silence that he loved. But this night there were burdens. He could not sleep. He could not keep his eyes shut. What question shone down in the pitiless stars? Something strange and inscrutable weighed upon him. He seemed to be haunted. Reason told him that it was well he had come to fight for his father. He could not be blamed for the machinations of evil men. He suffered no regret, no remorse. Yet there was something that he could not understand. It was a physical sensation that gave him a chill creeping of his flesh.

Next morning, in the rosy-gold of the sunrise, Pan was himself again, keen for the day.

"Pard, you get first pick of the wild hosses," announced Blinky.

"No, we'll share even," declared Pan.

"Say, boy, reckon we'd not had any hosses this mawnin' but fer you," rejoined his comrade. "An' some of us might not hev been so lively an' full of joy. Look at your dad! Shore you'd never think thet yestiddy he had his haid broke an' his heart, too. Now just would you?"

"Well, now you call my attention to it, Dad does look quite chipper."

Blinky bent to his ear: "Pard, it was the money thet perked him up."

"Listen, Blink," said Pan earnestly. "I don't want to be a kill-joy. Things do look wonderful for us. But I haven't dared yet to let myself go. I can't be gay, because something tells me the fight isn't over."

"Wal, pard," drawled Blinky, with his rare grin, "the way I feel aboot the fight is thet I ain't worryin' none if you're around. All the same, I'll take your hunch, an' you can bet your life I'll be watchin' like a hawk till we shake the dirty dust of Marco."

"Good, Blinky. We'll both keep our eyes open today so we can't be surprised by anybody."

Pan's father approached briskly, his face shining. "Boys, are we goin' to loaf round camp all day?"

"No, Dad, we're going to rope the best of the broomtails. I'll get a chance to see you sling a lasso."

"Say, I'd tackle it at that," laughed his father.

"Blinky, trapping these wild horses and handling them are two different things," remarked Pan. "Reckon I'll have to pass the buck to you."

"Wal, pard, I'm shore there. We'll chase all the hosses into the big corral. Then we'll pick out one at a time, an' if we cain't rope him without scarin' the bunch too bad we'll chase him into the small corral."

"All right. But I'll miss my guess if we don't have a hot dusty old time," replied Pan.

Gus and Brown brought in the saddle horses, and soon the men were riding down to the corrals. They were all keen and excited to see the wild horses, to pick and choose, and begin the day's work.

Upon their entrance to the first and

smaller corral a string of lean, ragged, wild-eyed mustangs trooped back into the larger corral.

"Wal, boys, the show begins," drawled Blinky. "Mr. Smith, you an' Charley take your stands by the gate, to open it when you see us comin' with a broomie we want to rope. An' Pan, you an' me an' Gus will ride around easy like, not pushin' the herd at all. They'll scatter an' mill around till they're tired. Then they'll bunch. When we see one we want we'll cut him out, an' shore rope him if we get close enough. But I reckon it'd be better to drive the one we want into the small corral, rope an' hobble him, an' turn him out into the pasture."

Pan and Blinky and Gus spread out. The wild horses moved away along the fence, and halted to face about. They let the riders approach to a hundred yards, then, with a trampling roar, they burst into action. They ran to the other side of the corral, where the horsemen leisurely followed them. Again they broke into mighty concerted action and into thunder of hoofs. They performed this maneuver several times before the riders succeeded in scattering them all over the pasture. Then it was easy to distinguish one from another.

Pan's first choice was a blue roan, a rare combination of color, build, and speed. The horse was a mare and had a good head. She had a brand on her left flank. Pan rode around after her,

here, there, all over the field, but without help he could not turn her where he wished.

He had to watch her closely to keep from losing sight of her, and he expected any moment that the boys would come to his assistance. But they did not. Whereupon Pan faced about, just in time to see a wonderful-looking animal shoot through the open gate into the smaller corral. Blinky and Gus rode after him.

The gate was closed, and then began a chase round the corral. The wild horse was at a disadvantage. He could not break through the solid fence or leap over it, and presently two lassos caught him at once, one round his neck, the other his feet. As he went down, Pan heard the piercing shriek. The two cowboys were out of their saddles in a twinkling, and while Gus held the horse down Blinky hobbled his front feet. Then they let him get up. Charley Brown ran to open another gate, that led out into the unfenced pasture. The animal, a big chestnut with tawny mane, leaped prodigiously, though fettered by the hobbles. Then he plunged and fell and rolled over. He got up to try again. The boys drove him through the gate.

"*Whoopee!*" pealed out Blinky's yell.

"Reckon those boys know their business," soliloquized Pan, and then he yelled for them to come and help him.

It took some time for Pan to find his roan, but when he espied her and pointed her out to Blinky and Gus the chase began. It was a leisurely performance. They headed the roan off, hedged her in a triangle, cut her out from the other horses, and toward the open gate. When the mare saw this avenue of escape she bolted through it.

Pan, being the farthest from the gate, was the last to follow. And when he rode in, to head off the furiously running roan, Gus made a beautiful throw with his lasso, a whirling wide loop that seemed to shoot perpendicularly across in front of her. She ran into it, and the violent check brought her down. Blinky was almost waiting to kneel on her head. And Gus, leaping off, hobbled her front feet. Snorting wildly, she got up and tried to leap. But she only fell. The boys roped her again and dragged her out into the pasture.

After that the picked horses came faster, until by noon they had ten hobbled in the open pasture. Two of these were Pan's. He had been hard to please. Afternoon found them again hard at their task. The wild horses had not only grown tired from trooping around the corral, but also somewhat used to the riders. That made choosing and driving and cutting out considerably easier. By the time the hunters had caught three others, the herd had become pretty well wearied and tamed.

"Let's call it off," shouted Pan. "I'm satisfied if you are."

"Aw, just one more, pard," implored Blinky. "I've had my eye on a little bay mare with four white feet. She's got a V Bar brand, and she's not so wild."

When Pan espied the bay he did not blame Blinky, and from that moment he grew more and more covetous. What a horse for Lucy!

The little animal was cunning. She relied more on crowding in among the other horses than in running free, and therefore she was hard to get out into the open.

"Aw, let the darn little smart filly go," exclaimed Blinky, giving up in disgust. "I never wanted her nohow."

"Cowboy, she's been my horse ever since you showed her to me," replied Pan. "But you didn't know it."

"Wal, you hoss-stealin' son-of-a-gun!" ejaculated Blinky with pleasure. "If you want her, we shore will run her legs off."

In the end they got Little Bay—as Pan had already named her—into the roping-corral. And there Pan chased her into a corner and threw a noose round her neck. She reared and snorted, but did not bolt.

"Hey, pard," called Blinky. "Shore as you're born she knows what a rope is. See! She ain't fightin' it. I'll bet you my shirt she's not been loose long. Get off an' haul up to her."

Pan did not need a second suggestion. He took time. He talked to her. With infinite patience he closed up on her, inch by inch. And at last he got a hand on her neck. She flinched, she appeared about to plunge, but Pan's gentle hand, his soothing voice kept her still. The brand on her flank was old. Pan loosened the noose of his lasso on her neck. It required more patience and dexterity to hobble her.

"Pard, this little bay is fer your gurl, huh?" queried Blinky.

"You guessed right. Little Bay! that's her name."

"Wal, now you got thet off your chest s'pose you climb on your hoss an' look heah," added Blinky.

The tone of his voice, the way he pointed over the cedar fence to the slope, caused Pan to leap into his saddle. In a moment his sweeping gaze caught horsemen and pack animals zigzagging down the trail.

"If it's Hardman's outfit, by Gawd, they're comin' back with nerve," said Blinky. "But I never figgered they'd come."

Pan cursed under his breath. "Ride, Blink."

They called the others and hurriedly got out of the corral into the open.

"Reckon camp's the best place to meet thet outfit, if they're goin' to meet us," declared Blinky.

They made their way back to camp with eyes ever on the zigzag trail, where in openings among the cedars the horsemen could occasionally be seen.

"Pard, are you goin' to let them ride right into camp?" queried Blinky.

"I guess not," replied Pan. "Rifle shot is near enough. They might pretend to be friendly till they got to us."

Not much more was spoken until the approaching horsemen emerged from the cedars at the foot of the slope. They rode straight toward the camp.

"How many?" asked Pan. "I count six riders."

"Seven fer me, an' aboot as many pack horses—"

After a long interval fraught with suspense, during which the horsemen approached steadily, Blinky suddenly burst out, "Fellers, shore as you're born it's Wiggate."

"The horse dealer from St. Louis!" ejaculated Pan in relief.

"It's Wiggate, son," corroborated Pan's father. "I met him once. He's a broad, heavy man with a thin gray chin beard. That's him."

"Aw, hell!" exclaimed Blinky. "There won't be any fight after all."

The approaching horsemen halted within earshot.

"Hi, there, camp," called the leader, whose appearance tallied with Smith's description. "Who's boss here?"

"Reckon I am," replied Pan.

"My name's Wiggate," replied the other loudly.

"All right, Mr. Wiggate. What's your business?"

"Friendly. Give my word. I want to talk horses."

"Come on up then."

Whereupon the horsemen advanced, and presently rode in under the trees into camp. The foremost was a large man, rather florid, with deep-set eyes and scant gray beard.

"Are you the younger Smith?" he asked, rather nervously eyeing Pan.

"Yes, sir."

"Word come to me this morning that you'd trapped a large number of horses," went on Wiggate. "I see that's a fact. Expect to make a deal for them?"

"Yes. No trading. No percentage. I want cash. They're a shade better stock than you've been buying around Marco. Better grass here, and they've not been chased lean."

"Haw many?"

"I don't know, but I'd say close to fifteen hundred head."

"Good Lord!" boomed the big man. "It's a haul indeed. I'll give you our regular price, twelve fifty, delivered in Marco."

"No, thanks," replied Pan.

"Thirteen."

Pan shook his head.

"Well, young man, what do you want?"

"I'll sell for ten dollars a head, cash, and count and deliver them here tomorrow."

"Sold!" snapped out Wiggate. "I can pay you tomorrow, but it'll take another day to get my men out here."

"Thank you—Mr. Wiggate," replied Pan. "That'll suit us."

"May we pitch camp here?"

"Sure. Get down and come in. Plenty of water and wood. Turn your horses loose. They can't get out."

Pan had to get away then for a while from his father and the exuberant Blinky. Fortune had smiled upon them. Rich in one drive—at one fell swoop! It was unbelievable. The retrieving of his father's losses, the new ranches in sunny Arizona, comfort and happiness for his mother, for Bobby and Alice—and for Lucy all that any reasonable woman could desire—these beautiful dreams had become possibilities. All the loneliness and privation of his hard life on the ranges had been made up for in a few short days. Pan's eyes dimmed.

Later he mingled again with the men around the campfire. At an opportune moment he confronted the horse buyer.

"How'd you learn about this drive of ours?" he asked.

"Hardman's men rode in to Marco this morning," replied Wiggate.

"Ah-uh! And they told a cock-and-bull story about what happened out here!" flashed Pan hotly.

"It placed you in a bad light, young man."

"I reckon. Well, if you or any of your outfit or anybody else calls me a horse thief he wants to go for his gun. Do you understand that?"

"It's pretty plain English," replied Wiggate.

"And here's some more. Jard Hardman *was* a horse thief," went on Pan in rising passion. "He was a low-down yellow horse thief. He hired men to steal for him. And, by God, he wasn't half as white as the outlaw who killed him!"

"Outlaw? I declare—we—I—do you

mean you're an—" floundered Wiggate. "We understood you killed Hardman."

"Hell, no!" shouted Blinky, bursting into the argument. "We was all there. We saw—"

"Blink, you keep out of this till I ask you to talk," ordered Pan.

"Smith, I'd like to hear what he has to say."

"Wiggate, you listen to me first," rejoined Pan. "There are three dead men across the field, not yet buried. Hardman, his man Purcell, and the outlaw Mac New. He called himself Hurd. He was one of Hardman's jailers there in Marco. But I knew Hurd as Mac New, back in Montana. I saved him from being hanged."

Pan then told in stern brevity the true details of that triple killing. After concluding, with white face and sharp gesture, he indicated to his men that they were to corroborate his statement.

"Mr. Wiggate, it's God's truth," spoke up Pan's father earnestly. "It was just retribution. Hardman robbed me years ago."

"Wal, Mr. Wiggate, my say is thet it'll be damned onhealthy fer anybody who doesn't believe my pard," added Blinky.

Gus stepped forward without any show of the excitement that characterized the others.

"If you need evidence other than our word, it's easy to find," he said. "Mac New's gun was not the same caliber as Pan's. An' as the bullet thet killed Hardman is still in his body it can be found."

"Gentlemen, that isn't necessary," replied Wiggate hastily, with a shudder. "Not for me. But my men can substantiate it. That might sound well in Marco. For I believe that your young leader—Panhandle Smith, they call him—is not so black as he has been painted."

Chapter Fifteen

"She's My Wife!"

THE following morning, Wiggate's men, accompanied by Blinky, attended to the gruesome detail of burying the dead men. Pan experienced relief that Wiggate had taken the responsibility.

Wiggate had all his men, except the one he had sent back to Marco, with several of Pan's engaged in counting the captured wild horses.

"Anxious to get back to Marco?" queried Wiggate, not unkindly.

"Yes, I am, now the job's done," replied Pan heartily.

"Well, I wouldn't be in any hurry, if I were you."

"What do you mean?"

"Young Hardman is to be reckoned with."

"Bah!" burst out Pan in scorn. "That pop-eyed skunk! What do I care for him?"

"Excuse me, I would not presume to advise you," returned Wiggate stiffly.

"Aw, I beg your pardon, Mr. Wiggate," apologized Pan. "I know you mean well. And I sure thank you for your advice."

Wiggate did not answer, but he took something from his vest pocket. It was a lead bullet, slightly flattened.

"Let me see your gun?" he asked.

Pan handed the weapon to him, butt first. Wiggate took it gingerly, and tried to fit the bullet in a chamber of the cylinder, and then in the barrel. It was too large to go in.

"This is the bullet that killed Hardman," said Wiggate gravely. "It was never fired from your gun. I shall make this evident in Marco. I've been fooled by Hardman, and cheated too. That's why I broke with him."

"Hope you didn't have any other association with him—besides this horse buying."

"No, but I'm lucky I didn't."

"Hardman had his finger in a lot of things in Marco. I wonder who'll take them up. Say, for instance, some of the gold claims he jumped."

"Well! I knew Hardman had mining interests, but I thought they were legitimate."

"Hardman's men, either at his instigation or Dick's, deliberately ran two of my men out of their claims. They'll tell you so."

"I'm astonished. I certainly am," replied Wiggate, and he looked it.

"Did the Yellow Mine belong to Hardman?" asked Pan curiously.

"Him and Matthews. Young Hardman claims it. He's already clashed with Matthews, so I heard."

"He'll do more than clash with Matthews, if he isn't careful. He'll *cash!*" declared Pan grimly. "Matthews is a four-flush sheriff. He wouldn't face a dangerous man. But he'd make short work of Dick Hardman."

"If I'm not inquisitive in asking—would you mind telling me, do you mean to *meet* Matthews and young Hardman?" inquired Wiggate.

"I'll avoid them if possible. Dad and I will get out of Marco pretty pronto. We're going to Arizona and homestead."

"That's sensible. I wish you luck. I shall make this my last horse deal here. It's profitable, but Marco is a little too—too raw for my blood."

According to, figures that the counters agreed upon there were fourteen hundred and eighty-six wild horses in the trap.

Wiggate paid cash upon the spot. Most of the money was in rather small bills, and Pan made haste to get rid of all except his share. He doubled the wages of those who had been hired. Then he divided what was left with Blinky.

"My—Gawd!" gasped that worthy, gazing at the enormous roll of bills. "How much heah?"

"Count it, you wild-eyed cowpuncher," replied Pan happily. "It's your half."

"But it's too much. Shore I'm robbin' you. This was your drive."

"Yes, and it was your outfit," returned Pan. "You furnished the packs, horses, location, and I furnished the execution. Looks like a square deal, share and share alike."

"All right, pard," replied Blinky, swallowing hard. "If you reckon thet way. But will you keep this heah roll fer me?"

"Keep it yourself, you Indian."

"But, pard, I'll get drunk an' go on a tear. An' you know how bad I am when I get likkered up."

"Blink, you're not going to drink, unless in that one deal I hinted about," said Pan meaningly. "Hope we can avoid it."

"Wal, pard, I'll stay sober as long as you. Shake on it."

Pan made his plans to leave next morning as early as the wild horses they had hobbled could be gotten into shape to travel. Wiggate expected the riders he had sent for to arrive before noon the next day; and it was his opinion that he would have all the horses

he had purchased out of there in a week.

As Pan rode out on the sorrel, with his father and Blinky following, to face north on the road to Marco, he found it hard to contain himself. This hour was the very first in which he could let himself think of the glorious fulfillment of his dream.

Almost, he loved this wild and rugged land. But that was the ecstasy of the moment. This iron country was too cut up by mountains, with valleys too bare and waterless, to suit Pan.

Nevertheless on this bright autumn morning there was a glamour over valley and ridge, black slope and snowy peak, and the dim distant ranges. The sky was as blue as the inside of a columbine, a rich and beautiful light of gold gilded the wall of rock that boldly cropped out of the mountainside; and the wide sweeping expanse of sage lost itself in a deep purple horizon. The air was sweet, intoxicating, full of cedar fragrance and the cool breath from off the heights.

While he saw and felt all this his mind scintillated with thoughts of Lucy Blake. He would see her presently, have the joy of surprising her into betrayal of love. He fancied her wide eyes of blue, and the swift flame of scarlet that so readily stained her neck and cheek.

He would tell her about the great good fortune that had befallen him; and about the beautiful mare, Little Bay, he had captured for her; and they could talk and plan endlessly, all the way down to Siccane.

Dreaming thus, Pan rode along without being aware of the time or distance.

"Hey, pard," called Blinky. "Are you goin' to ride past where your gurl lives?"

With a violent start Pan wheeled his horse. He saw that he had indeed ridden beyond the entrance to a farm, which upon second look he recognized.

"I'm loco, all right," he replied with a little laugh.

Through gate and lane they galloped, on to the corral, and round that to the barn. Pan leaped from his horse. With an uplift of his heart that was almost pain, he rushed round the corner of the house to the vine-covered porch.

The door was shut. Stealthily he tiptoed across the porch to knock. No answer! He tried the door. Locked! A quiver ran through him.

"Strange," he muttered, "not home this early."

He peered through the window, to see ample evidence of recent packing. He went on to look into his mother's bedroom. The bed had been used during the night and had not been made up. Perhaps his mother and Lucy had gone into Marco to purchase necessities. Hurriedly he returned to the barn.

"Nobody home," Pan announced.

"Well, that's nothin' to make you pale round the gills," returned his father. "They're gone to town. Mother had a lot of buyin' to do."

"But I particularly told Lucy to stay here."

"S'pose you did," interposed Blinky. "You don't expect this heah gurl to mind you."

"No time for joking, Blink," said Pan curtly. "It just doesn't set right on my chest. I've got to find Lucy pronto. But where to go!" With a single step he reached his stirrup and swung into his saddle.

"Now, Dad, buy three wagons and

teams, grain, grub, and whatever else we need for two weeks or more on the road. Soon as I find Lucy and Mother I'll meet you and help you with the buying. Come on, Blink."

Blinky joined him out in the road.

"Pard, I don't get your hunch, but I can see you're oneasy."

"I'm just loco, that's all," returned Pan. "It's—such—such a disappointment not to see—her. Makes me think how anything might happen. I never trusted Jim Blake. And Lucy is only a kid in years.

"Ahuh," said Blinky. "Reckon you wouldn't feel thet way fer nothin'."

"Blink, I'm afraid there's something wrong."

"Shore. Wal, we'll find out pronto, an' if there is, we'll damn soon make it right."

They rode rapidly until they reached the outskirts of town, when Blinky called Pan to a halt.

"Reckon you'd better not ride through Main Street," he said significantly.

They tied their horses behind a clump of trees between two deserted shacks. Pan removed his ragged chaps, to be freer of movement.

Main Street presented the usual morning atmosphere and color, though Pan fancied there was more activity than usual. That might have been owing to the fact that both the incoming and outgoing stages were visible far up at the end of the street.

Pan strained his eyes, seeking some sign of Lucy. Soon he would reach the first store. But before he got there he saw his mother emerge, dragging Bobby, who evidently wanted to stay. Then Alice followed. Pan's heart made ready for a second and greater leap—in anticipation of Lucy's appearance. But she did not come.

Pan saw his mother turn white and reel as if about to faint. He got to her in time.

"Mother! Why, Mother," he cried. "It's me. I'm all right. What'd you think? Hello, Bobby. Alice, don't stare at me. I'm here in the flesh."

His mother clung to him with hands like steel. Her face and eyes were both terrible and wonderful to see. "Pan! Pan! Your'e alive? Oh, thank God! They told us you'd been shot."

"Me? Well, I guess not. I'm better than ever. Brace up, Mother. People are looking. Where's Lucy?"

"Oh, God—my son, my son!" cried Mrs. Smith, her eyes rolling.

"*Hush!*" burst out Pan, with a shock as if a blade had pierced his heart. He shook her, not gently. "*Where* is Lucy?"

His mother wheeled to point up the street. "Lucy!" There—in that stage—leaving Marco!"

"For God's—sake!" gasped Pan. Something terrible seemed to crash inside him Catastrophe!

"Mother, go home at once," he said swiftly. "Tell Dad to rush buying those wagons. You and Alice pack. We shake the dust of this damned town. Don't worry. Lucy will leave with *us*!"

Then Pan broke into long springy strides, almost a run. Indeed Blinky had to run to keep up with him. Pan had only one conscious thought—to see Lucy.

They reached the end of the street and across the wide square stood the outgoing stage, before the express office. There was no driver on the front seat. Smith, the agent, was emerging from the office with mailbags.

"Slow up, pard," whispered Blinky, at Pan's elbow.

Pan did as he was advised, though his stride still retained speed. There were passengers in the stagecoach. When Pan reached the middle of the street he saw the gleam of golden hair that he knew. Lucy! Her back was turned to him. And as he realized he had found her, there burst forth in his mind a thundering clamor of questioning voices.

A few more strides took him round the stage. The door was open.

"*Lucy!*" he called.

She turned a strange face, but he knew her eyes, saw the swift transition, the darkening, widening. How white she turned! What was this? Agony in recognition? He saw her lips frame his name, but no sound came.

"*Lucy!*" he cried. "What does this mean? Where are you going?"

She could not speak. But under her pallor the red of shame began to burn. Pan recognized it. He asked hoarsely,

"What's it mean?"

"Pard, take a peep round heah," drawled Blinky.

Pan wheeled. He had the shock of his life. Dick Hardman! Fashionably and wonderfully attired? Pan got no farther than sight of the frock coat, elaborate vest, flowing tie, and high hat. Then for a second he went blind.

When the red film cleared he saw Hardman pass him, saw the pallor of his cheek, the quivering of muscle, the strained protruding of his eye.

He got one foot on the stage step when Pan found release for his voice.

"*Hardman!*"

That halted the youth, but he never turned his head. The shuffling of feet inside the coach hinted of more than restlessness. There was scattering of men from behind Pan.

He leaped at Hardman, spun him round. "Where are you going?"

"Frisco, if it's—any of your business." replied Hardman incoherently.

"Looks like I'll make it my business," returned Pan menacingly. Then: "Hardman—do you mean—do you think —you're taking *her*—away?" he queried, as if strangling.

"Ha!" returned Hardman with an upfling of head, arrogant and vain, for all his fear. "I know it. She's my wife!"

Chapter Sixteen

Blood on the Yellow Mine Floor

PANHANDLE SMITH reeled on his feet. For a moment all seemed opaque, with blurred images. There was a crash, crash, crash of something beating at his ears.

How long this terrible oblivion possessed Pan he did not know. But at Hardman's move to enter the stage, he came back a million times more alive than ever he had been—possessed of devils.

With one powerful lunge he jerked Hardman back and flung him sprawling into the dust.

"There! Once more!" cried Pan, panting. "Remember—the schoolhouse? That fight over Lucy Blake! Damn your skunk soul! Get up, *if* you've got a gun!"

Hardman leaned on his hand. His high hat had rolled away. His broadcloth suit was covered with dust. But he did not note these details. Like a craven thing fascinated by a snake he had his staring eyes fixed upon Pan, and his face was something no man could bear to see.

"I've no—gun—" he replied in husky accents.

"Talk, then. Maybe I can keep from killing you."

"For God's sake—don't shoot me. I'll tell you anything."

"Hardman, you say you—you *married* my—this girl?" rasped out Pan.

"Yes—I married her."

"*How* did you force her?"

"I swear to God she was willing. Her father wanted her to."

"What? Jim Blake left here for Arizona. I sent him away."

"But he never went—I—I mean he got caught—put in jail again. Matthews sent for the officers. They said they'd put Blake away for ten years. But I got him off. Then Lucy was willing to marry me—and she did."

"*Liar!*" hissed Pan. "You frightened her—tortured her."

"No, I—I didn't do anything. It was her father. He persuaded her."

"Drove her, you mean. And you paid him. Admit it or I'll—"

"Yes—yes, I did," jerked out Hardman in a hoarser, lower voice.

"Go get yourself a gun. You'll have to kill me before you start out on your honeymoon. Reckon I think you're going to hell. Get up. Go get yourself a gun."

Hardman staggered to his feet, gazed strickenly at Pan. "My God, I can't fight you. You won't murder me in cold blood. Smith, I'm Lucy's husband—she's my wife."

"And what is Louise Melliss?" whipped out Pan. "What does *she* say about your marriage? You ruined her, abandoned her to that hellhole owned by your father. He got his just deserts and you'll get yours."

Hardman cringed at Pan's words.

"Get out of my sight," cried Pan, at the end of his endurance. "And remember the next time I see you, I'll begin to shoot."

Pan struck him, shoved him out into the street. Hardman staggered on. He got to going faster until he broke into an uneven half-run. He kept going until he reached the Yellow Mine, where he ran up the steps and disappeared.

Pan backed slowly, step by step, coming out of his obsession. Lucy had left the stage and she stood alone. She spoke his name. In the single low word he divined fear. How long had she been that dog's wife? When had she married him? Yesterday, or the day before—a week, what did it matter?

"*You—you!*" he burst out helplessly. He hated her then—hated her beauty—and her betrayal of him. What was life to him now?

"Go back to my mother," he ordered harshly, and averted his face.

Then he seemed to forget her. He saw Blinky close to him, deeply shaken, yet composed and grim.

"All aboard for Salt Lake," called the stage driver.

"Pard," Pan said, laying a hand on Blinky. "Go with her—take her to my mother. And leave me alone."

"No, by Gawd!" replied Blinky sullenly. "You forget this heah is my deal too. There's Louise. An' Lucy hurried away. There, she's runnin' past the Yellow Mine."

"Blink, did she hear what I said to Hardman about Louise?"

"Reckon not. She'd keeled over aboot then. I tell you, pard—"

"Never mind," interrupted Pan. "What's the difference? Hellsfire! Whisky! Let's get a drink. It's whisky I want."

"Shore. Come on, pard. It's redeye fer us!"

They crossed to the corner saloon, a low dive kept by a Chinese and frequented by Mexicans and Indians.

"Howdy," was Blinky's greeting to the black bottle that was thumped upon the counter. "Heah's to Panhandle Smith!"

Pan drank. The fiery liquor burned down to meet and coalesce round that gnawing knot in his internals. It augmented while it soothed. It burned as it cooled. It inflamed, but did not intoxicate.

"Pard, heah's to the old Cimarron," said Blinky, as they drank again. They drank and drank. Blinky's tongue grew looser.

"Hold your tongue, damn you," said Pan.

"Imposshiblity. Lesh have another."

"One more then. You're drunk, cowboy."

"Me drunk? No, shir, pard. I'm just tongue-tied. Now, by Gawd, heah's to Louise Melliss!"

"I drink to that," flashed Pan, as he drained his glass.

The afternoon had waned. Matthews lay dead in the street. He lay in front of the Yellow Mine, from which he had been driven by men who would no longer stand the strain.

The street was deserted except for that black figure, lying face down with a gun in his right hand.

Pan had patrolled the street. He had made a house-to-house canvass, searching for Jim Blake. He had entered every place except the Yellow Mine. That he reserved for the last.

Now Pan entered the dance hall. After a tense moment the poker players went on with their game and the drinkers emptied their glasses. But voices were low, glances were furtive.

Pan had seen every man there before he had been seen himself. Only one interested him—Jim Blake. What to do to this man or with him Pan found it hard to decide. Blake had indeed fallen low. But Pan gave him the benefit of one doubt—that he had been wholly dominated by Hardman. Yet there was the matter of accepting money for his part in forcing Lucy to marry Dick.

"Blink, do you know where Louise's room is?" queried Pan.

"Shore. Down thish hall—third door on left."

"Well, you go over there to Blake and tell him I want to talk to him. Then you go to Louise's room. I'll follow directly."

Blake received the message. Pan caught his suspicious eye, baleful, gleaming. Possibly the man was worse than weak. Presently he left the poker game which he had been watching and shuffled up to Pan. He appeared to be enough under the influence of liquor to be leeringly bold.

"Howdy," he said.

"Blake, today I got from Hardman the truth about the deal you gave me and Lucy," returned Pan, and then in cold deliberate tones he called the man every infamous name known to the ranges.

"Reckon you think," concluded Pan, "that because you're Lucy's father I can't take a shot at you. Don't fool yourself. You've killed her soul—and mine. So why shouldn't I kill you?

Well, there isn't any reason except that away from Hardman's influence you might brace up. I'll take the chance. You're done in Marco. Now you rustle out that door and out of Marco. When you make a man of yourself come to Siccane, Arizona."

Blake lurched himself erect, met Pan's glance with astonished, bewildered eyes, then wheeled to march out of the saloon.

Pan turned into the hallway leading into the hotel part of the building, and soon encountered Blinky.

"Blink, isn't she in?" asked Pan, low-voiced and eager.

"Shore, but she won't open the door."

Pan knocked and called low, "Louise, let us in."

There was a long wait, then came a low voice: "No."

"Please, it's Panhandle Smith."

"That cowboy's drunk and I—no—I'm sorry."

"Louise, *I'm* not drunk, but I *am* in bad temper. I ask as a friend. Don't cross me here. I can easy shove in this door."

He heard soft steps, then a key turned in the lock, and the door opened. The lamplight was not bright. Louise stood there half dressed, her bare arms and bosom gleaming. Pan entered, dragging Blinky with him.

"Louise, it wasn't kind of you to do that," said Pan reproachfully. "Have you any better friends than Blinky or me?"

"God knows—I haven't," faltered the girl. "But I've been ill—in bed. I—I—heard about you—today—and Blink being with you—drunk."

Pan stepped to the red-shaded lamp on a small table beside the bed, and turned up the light. He bent searching eyes upon Louise. She did look ill—white, with great dark shadows under her eyes.

"What do you want of me?" she asked.

Pan took her hands and pulled her a little toward him. "Louise, you like me, don't you, as a friend or brother?" he asked gently.

"Yes, when I'm sober," she replied wanly.

"And you like Blinky, here, don't you—like him a lot?"

"I did. I couldn't help it, the damn faithful little cowboy. But I hate him when he's drunk, and he hates me when I'm drunk."

"Blink, go out and fetch back a bottle—presently. We'll all get drunk."

The cowboy stared like a solemn owl, then very quietly went out.

"Louise, put something over your shoulders. You'll catch cold. Here." Pan picked a robe off the bed and wrapped it round her. "I didn't know you were so pretty. No wonder poor Blink worships you."

She drew away from him and sat upon the bed, dark eyes questioning, suspicious. Yet she seemed fascinated. Pan caught a slight quivering of her frame. Suddenly he remembered that Hardman had fled to this house—was hidden there now. Pan's nerves tautened.

"Louise," he began, taking her hand again, "we've had a great drive. Blink and I have had luck. Oh, such luck! We sold over fifteen hundred horses. Well, we're going to Arizona, to a sunny open country, not like this. Blink and I want you to go with us."

"What! How, in God's name?" she gasped in utter amaze.

"Why, as Blink's wife, of course."

She stared a second, white and still,

with great solemn searching eyes on his. Pan felt embarrassed, yet somehow happy that he had dared to approach her with such a proposition.

Suddenly she kissed him, clung to him, buried her face on his shoulder.

"What do you say, little girl?" he went on. "It's a chance for you to be good again. It'll save that wild cowboy. He loves you. He worships you. He hates what you have to suffer here. He—"

"No! No! No! I wouldn't degrade even a worthless cowboy."

"You're wrong. He'll *not* be worthless, if you repay his faith. Louise, don't turn your back on hope, on love, on a home."

"No!" she flashed passionately.

"Why?" he returned in sharp appeal.

"Because he's too good for me. Because I don't deserve your friendship. But so help me God, I'll love you both all the rest of my miserable life—which won't be long."

He took her in his arms. "But, you poor child, this is no place for you. You'll only go to hell—commit suicide or be killed in a drunken brawl."

"Panhandle, I may end even worse," she replied in bitter mockery. "I might marry Dick Hardman. He talks of it—when he's drunk."

Pan released her. "*Marry* you! Dick Hardman talks of that?"

"Yes. And I might let him when I'm drunk. I'd do anything then."

At that moment the door opened and Blinky entered carrying a bottle and glasses.

"Good, Blink, old pard," said Pan, breathing heavily. "Louise and I have just made up our minds to get drunk together. Blink, you stay sober."

"I cain't stay what I ain't," retorted Blinky. "An I won't stay heah, either, to see her drink. I hate her then."

She poured the dark red liquor out into the glasses. "Boy, I want you to hate me. I'll make you hate me. Here's to Panhandle Smith!"

While she drank Blinky moved backward to the door, eyes glinting brightly into Pan's, and then he was gone.

In the mood under which Pan labored, liquor had little effect upon him. The girl, however, was transformed into another creature. Bright red spots glowed in her cheeks, her eyes danced, her whole body answered to the stimulus. One drink led to another. She grew hilarious, then sentimental, and finally lost herself in that stage of unnatural abandon for which, when sober, she frankly confessed she drank.

Pan decided that presently he would wrap a blanket around her, pick her up, and pack her out. Blinky would shoot out the lights in the saloon, and the rest would be easy. If she knew that Hardman was in the house, as Pan had suspected, she had now no memory of it.

"You big handsome devil," she called Pan. "I told you—to keep away from me."

"Louise, don't make love to me," replied Pan.

"Why not? Men are all alike."

"No, you're wrong. I've lost my sweetheart, and my heart is broken."

She leered at him, and offered him another drink. Pan took the glass away from her. It was possible he might overdo his part.

"So you're liable to marry young Hardman?" he asked deliberately.

The question, the name, startled her memory.

"Sure I am."

"But, Louise, how can you marry

Hardman when he already has a wife?" asked Pan.

"You lie, you gun-slinging cowboy!" she cried.

"No, Louise. He told me so himself,"

"He did! When?" she whispered, very low.

"Today. He was at the stage office. He meant to leave today. He was all togged up, frock coat, high hat. Oh, God—Louise, I know, I *know*, because it—was—my—sweetheart—he married."

"*Your* sweetheart? Little Lucy—you told me about?"

"Yes, Lucy, I told you," he said, reaching for her. "He forced her to marry him. They had Lucy's father in jail. Dick got him out. Oh, it was all a scheme to work on the poor girl. She thought it was to save her father. Louise, I'm going to kill Dick Hardman."

"Like hell you are!" she hissed, and leaped swiftly to snatch something from under the pillow.

Pan started back, thinking that she meant to attack him. How tigerishly she bounded! Her white arm swept aside red curtains. They hid a closet. It seemed her white shape flashed in and out. A hard choking gasp! Something hard dropped to the floor with metallic sound.

The hall door opened with a single sweep. Blinky stood framed there, wild-eyed. And the next instant Dick Hardman staggered from that closet. He had both hands pressed to his abdomen. Blood poured out in a stream. Hardman reeled out into the hall, groaning. He slipped along the wall. Pan leaped, to see him slide down into a widening pool of blood.

It was a paralyzing moment. But Pan recovered first. The girl swayed with naked arms outstretched against the wall. On her white wrist showed a crimson blot. Pan, snatching a blanket off the bed, threw it round her, wrapped it tight, and lifted her in his arms.

"Blink, go ahead," he whispered, as he went into the hall. "Hurry! Shoot out the lights! Go through the dance hall!"

The cowboy leaped over Hardman's body, huddled and lax, and down the hall, pulling his guns.

Pan edged round the body on the floor. He saw a ghastly face—protruding eyes. And on the instant, like lightning, came the thought that Lucy was free. Almost immediately thundering shots filled the saloon. The lights faded, darkened, went out. Yells and scraping chairs and overturned tables, breaking glass, pounding boots merged in a pandemonium of sound.

Pan hurried through the dance hall, found the doorway, gained the side entrance to the street. Blinky waited there, smoking guns in his hands.

"Heah—this—way," he directed in a panting whisper, as he sheathed the guns, and took the lead. Pan followed in the shadow of the houses.

Chapter Seventeen

Revelation

THE street down that way was dark, with but few lights showing. Pan carried Louise at rapid pace, as if she made no burden at all. In the middle of the next block Blinky slowed up, carefully scrutinizing the entrances to the buildings. They came to an open hallway, dimly lighted. Pan read a sign he remembered.

"Go in, Blink," directed Pan quickly. "If you find the parson chase everybody but him and call me pronto."

Blinky ran into the place. Pan let Louise down on her feet. She could not stand alone.

"Cowboy—smozzer me," she giggled, pulling at the fold of blanket round her face.

Pan rearranged the blanket over her bare shoulders, and folded it round more like a coat.

"Whaz-mazzer now, cowboy? Somebody's raid us?"

"Hush, Louie," whispered Pan, shaking her. "There'll be a gang after us."

"Hell with gang. Shay, Pan, whaz become of Dick?"

She was so drunk she did not remember. Pan thanked God for that.

A low whistle made Pan jump. Blinky stood inside in a flare of light from an open door. He beckoned. Pan lifted the girl and carried her in.

Five minutes later they came out, one on each side of Louise, trying to keep her quiet. They hurried down the dark street, almost carrying her between them. A few people passed, fortunately on the other side. These pedestrians were hurrying in the other direction. Some excitement uptown, Pan thought grimly! Soon they passed the outskirts of Marco and gained the open country. They were safe.

Suddenly Blinky gave Pan a punch. Turning, Pan saw his comrade point back. A dull red flare lighted up the sky. Fire! The Yellow Mine was burning. The crowd of drinkers and gamblers had fled before Blinky's guns. Pan was hoping that only he and Blinky would ever know who had killed Dick Hardman.

The road curved. Soon a flickering light told Pan they had reached his father's place. They entered the lane and cut off through the dew-wet grass of the orchard to the barn. Pan caught the round pale gleam of canvas-covered wagons.

"Good! Dad sure rustled," said Pan with satisfaction. "If he got the horses, too, we can leave tomorrow."

"Shore, we will anyhow," replied Blinky, now sober and serious.

They found three large wagons and one smaller, with a square canvas top.

"Blink, hold her, till I get some hay," said Pan.

He hurried into the open side of the barn. He heard horses munching grain. That meant his father had bought the teams. Pan got an armful of hay, and carrying it out to the wagon, he threw it in, and spread it out for a bed.

"Reckon we'd better put Louise here," said Pan. "I'll get some blankets from Dad."

Blinky was standing there in the starlight holding the girl in his arms. His head was bowed over her wan face. They lifted Louise into the wagon and laid her down upon the hay.

"Whish you—gennelmanz my hushband?" she asked thickly.

Pan had to laugh at that, but Blinky stood gazing intently down upon the pale gleam of face. Pan left him there and strode toward the house. He heard his father's voice.

"Dad," he called, tapping on the window. Then he saw his mother and Alice. They had started up from packing. The door opened with a jerk.

"That you—Pan?" called his father with agitation.

"Nobody else, Dad," replied Pan, trying to calm his voice. "Tell Mother I'm here safe and sound."

His mother heard and answered with a low cry of relief.

"Dad, come out. Shut the door," returned Pan sharply.

Once outside his father saw the great flare of light above the town.

"Look! Must be fire!" he burst out.

"Reckon it is fire," returned Pan shortly. "Blinky shot out the lamps in the Yellow Mine. Fire must have caught from that."

"Yellow Mine!" echoed Smith.

Pan laid a heavy hand on him. "Lucy! Did she—come home?" he forced out.

"Sure. Didn't you know? She was home when I got here at noon. She was in an awful state, poor girl! She had hysterics. But Mother got her quieted down by suppertime."

"Where is she now?"

"In bed, I reckon. Leastways in her room."

"Dad, does she know? But of course she couldn't—nor could you! Well, better tell Lucy at once."

"Tell Lucy what?" asked Smith anxiously.

"That she's a widow."

"It—is Dick Hardman dead?" gasped out Smith.

"Yes."

"My God! Son—did—did you—"

"Dad, I didn't kill him," interrupted Pan. "Dick Hardman was—was knocked out—just before Blinky shot out the lights. Reckon it's a good bet no one will ever know. He sure was burned up in that fire."

"*Alive?*" whispered Smith.

"He might still have been alive, but he was far gone—unconscious when I passed him in the hall. You needn't tell Lucy that. Just tell her Hardman is dead and that *I* didn't kill him."

"All right, I'll do it," replied his father huskily.

"Before you do it fetch me a roll of blankets. Blinky's wife is with us."

"Wife? I didn't know Blinky had one. Fetch her in. We'll make room somewhere."

"No, we've already fixed a place for her in that wagon with the square top," went on Pan. "She's been sick. Rustle, Dad. Fetch me the blankets."

"Got them right inside," said Smith, opening the door to hurry in.

"Mother," called Pan, "everything's all right. We'll be leaving early tomorrow."

Then his father reappeared with a roll of blankets. Pan found Blinky exactly as he had left him, leaning over the wagon.

"Blink, put a couple of these blankets over her," directed Pan.

"She went right off, asleep, like she was daid," whispered the cowboy, and he took the blankets and laid them softly over the quiet form Pan saw dimly in the starlight.

"Come here, cowboy," called Pan. "Listen, pard. We're playing a deep game, and by God, it's an honest game, even though we have to lie. Louise will never remember she cut that traitor's heart out. She was too crazy. If it half returns to her we'll lie—you understand—*lie*. Nobody will ever know who did kill Hardman, I'll gamble. I intended to, and all Marco must have known that. If he burned up they can't ever be sure. Anyway, that doesn't matter. It's our womenfolks we've got to think of. I told Dad you'd brought your wife—that she'd been sick. He'll tell Mother and Lucy. They don't know, and they never will know what kind of a girl Louise has been. Savvy, pard?"

"Reckon I do," replied Blinky, in hoarse trembling accents. "But won't we have hell with Louise—when she wakes up sober?"

"Cowboy, you bet we will. But we'll

be far on our way when she wakes up. And, well--leave it to me, Blink."

Pan strode off in the starlight, across the orchard, down along the murmuring stream to the cottonwood tree with the bench.

Lucy had betrayed him. She had broken his heart. What if she had thought him dead—sacrificed herself to save her father? She had given herself to that dog Hardman. The thought was insupportable. "I hate her," he whispered. "She's made me hate her."

The hours passed, the stars moved across the heavens, the night wind ceased. Spent and beaten, Pan sat upon the bench. His love for Lucy had not been killed. It lived, it had grown, it was tremendous—and both pity and reason clamored that he be above jealousy and hate. After all, Lucy was young, she had been driven by grief over his supposed death and fear for her father.

"I'll try to forget," he whispered huskily. "I've got to. But I can't do it yet. We'll leave this country far behind. And someday we can go on with—with all we planned."

Next morning Pan made himself presentable before anyone saw him. When he faced his mother it was with composure that belied the state of his feelings. She appeared to be in a blaze of excitement. Then he heard Alice's voice and Lucy's in reply.

The girls entered the kitchen. Alice's reply to his greeting was at once bright and shy. Lucy halted in the doorway, with a hand on her breast. Her smile, slow and wistful, seemed to blot out traces of havoc in her face. Pan's slight head inclination, unaccompanied by word of greeting, was as black a pretense as he had ever been guilty of. Sight of her had shot him through and through with pangs of bitter mocking joy. But he gave no sign. During the meal he did not look at her again.

"Dad, have you got everything we'll need?" queried Pan presently.

"I guess so," replied Smith. "You can start loadin' the wagons. An' by the time two of them are done we'll have everythin' packed."

"Blink can drive one wagon, you another, and I'll take the third till we get out to Snyder's. Then we'll need another driver, for it'll take two of us to handle the wild horses."

"No, we won't," replied his father. "Your mother an' Lucy can drive as well as I. Son, I'll help you hitch up."

They had reached the end of the arbor when Lucy's voice called after them: "Pan—please wait."

He turned to see her coming, twisting her apron in nervous hands. Pan's father and Blinky kept on toward the barn. Lucy came hurriedly, unevenly, pale, with parted lips and eyes that held him.

She halted close to him. "Day before yesterday—those men brought word you'd been—killed in a fight over wild horses. It broke my heart. I'd have taken my own life but for my father. I didn't care what happened. Dick pressed me hard. Father begged me to save him from prison. So I—I married Dick."

"Yes, I know—I figured it out that way," returned Pan in strange thick utterance. "You didn't need to tell me."

"Why, Pan, you—you seem *different*," she said, bewildered. "Your look—your voice—oh, dear. I know yesterday was awful. It must have driven you mad."

"By heaven, it did!" muttered Pan.

"But you—you forgive me?" she fal-

tered, reaching to touch him with a shaking hand.

"Forgive you for—?" he cried in fierce passion. But he could not put into words what she had done. "I meant to kill that dog, Dick Hardman. But I didn't. Forgive you—" he broke off, unable to go on.

She was slow to grasp his intimation, though not his fury. Suddenly her eyes dilated in horror. Then a great wave of scarlet blood swept over her white neck and face. Pan swung away and left her.

He plunged into the work at hand, and during the next couple of hours recovered from the shock of resisting Lucy's appeal. He hated himself for the passion he could not subdue. When, however, it had slunk away for the time being, he began to wonder at her innocence and simplicity. He could not understand her.

Presently his father and Blinky hunted him up.

"Son, Marco is with you to a man!"

"What happened?"

"Evans drove out bringin' stuff I bought yesterday," returned his father. "He was full of news. By some miracle, only the Yellow Mine burned. It was gutted, but the bucket brigade saved the houses on each side. Hardman's body was found burned to a crisp. It was identified by a ring. An' his dance-hall girl was found dead too, burned most as bad as he. Accordin' to Evans, most everybody in Marco wants to shake hands with Panhandle Smith."

The covered wagons wound slowly down the hill toward Snyder's pasture. Pan, leading Blink's horse, held to the rear. The day, in some respects, had been as torturing to him as yesterday—but with Marco far behind and the open road ahead, calling, beckoning, the strain began to lessen.

At the pasture gate the drivers halted the wagon teams, waiting for Pan to come up. Gus had opened the wide-barred gate, and now stood there with a grin of relief and gladness.

"Drive in," shouted Pan from behind. "We'll camp here tonight."

They drove in along the west fence, where a row of trees shaded the still hot sun.

Supper was soon in progress, with the capable Mrs. Smith bustling about. Lucy and Alice were assisting. Pan stole a glance at Lucy. Her face was flushed from the wind and sun. Bobby and his two puppies were much in the way.

"Pan, how is Mrs. Somers?" inquired his mother solicitously.

"Who?" queried Pan, puzzled.

"Why, your partner's wife."

"Oh, Blinky! Gee, I'd clean forgot his right name," laughed Pan, mentally kicking himself. "She's still sound asleep. I told Blinky not to wake her. She looked white and worn out."

"But she'll starve," interposed Lucy. "You men don't know anything. Won't you let me wake her?"

"Thanks. Better let her alone till tomorrow," replied Pan briefly.

Presently there came the call to supper, which had been laid upon a new tarpaulin spread on the ground. The men flopped down and sat cross-legged, each with appreciation of that generous repast.

Pan observed that both Alice and his mother strictly avoided serving him. They let Lucy do it. Pan did not look

up at her. Once her hand touched his and the contact was like a galvanizing current. For the moment he could not go on eating.

It was after nightfall when Pan heard Blinky's call. He hurried over to the wagon, where he found his comrade tremendously excited.

"Pard, she's waked up," he whispered.

Pan strode to the wagon. There was enough light for him to see the girl sitting up, with hands pressed to her head.

"Hello, Louie," he said gently.

"Where the hell am I?" she replied huskily.

"On the way to Arizona."

"Well, if it isn't handsome Panhandle—and Blinky!"

"Howdy—Louie," said Blinky fearfully.

"I've been drunk?" she queried.

"Reckon you have—a little," replied Pan.

"And you boys have kidnaped me?" she went on.

"I'm afraid that's so, Louie."

"Get me a drink. *Not* water! My head's bursting. And help me out of this haymow."

She threw aside the blanket and got to her knees. Pan lifted her out of the wagon. Then he ran off toward camp to get a flask. Upon returning he found Blinky trying to put a blanket round Louise's shoulders. She threw it off.

"Wait till I cool off," she said. "Panhandle, did you get it? I'm shaky, all right. Thanks. Someday I'll take my last drink."

"Louie, I hope that will be soon," rejoined Pan.

"You know I hate whisky. Oh, my head! And my legs are cramped. Let me walk a little."

Presently she returned. "Help me up. I'm sick—and weak."

They lifted her back into the wagon and covered her.

"No use—to lie," she said drowsily, her head rolling. "I'm glad to leave—Marco. Take me anywhere."

Then her eyes closed. Pan drew Blinky away into the gloom.

"It's the way I figured," whispered Pan swiftly. "She'll never remember what happened."

"Thank Gawd fer thet," breathed Blinky.

They found the campfire deserted except for Gus and Pan's father.

"Son, I—I was just tellin' Gus what come off yesterday," explained Smith. "But there are some points I'd sure like cleared up for myself."

Pan had expected this. "Well, get it over then once and for all."

"You come damn near buttin' right into the weddin'!" ejaculated Smith.

Pan, whose back had been turned to the campfire light, suddenly whirled as if on a pivot.

"*What?*" he cried.

"Why, son, you needn't jump out of your boots," returned the father. "Lucy was married to Hardman in the stage office just before you got there. Fact was, she'd just walked out to get in the stage when you came. Now, I was only sayin' how funny it'd been if you had got there sooner."

"Who—told—you—that?"

"Lucy told me. An' she said tonight she didn't believe you knew," returned his father.

There was a silence. Pan slowly turned away from the light.

"No. I had an idea—she'd been married—days," replied Pan. He stalked away into the darkness.

Pan gained the pasture fence under

the dark trees, and he grasped it tightly. The shock of incredulous amaze passed away, leaving him in the grip of joy and gratitude and remorse.

Chapter Eighteen

Arizona Bound

It was Pan who routed out the campers next morning when the first rose of dawn flushed the clear-cut horizon line.

He had the firewood collected, and the saddle horses in for their grain before Blinky presented himself. Wild-eyed, indeed, was the cowboy.

"Pard," he whispered huskily, "the cyclone's busted."

"Yes?" queried Pan in both mirth and concern.

"I was pullin' on my boots when Louise pokes her head above the wagon an' says, 'Hey, you bowlegged gurl-snatcher, where's my clothes?"

" 'Louie,' I says, 'they burned up with all the rest of the Yellow Mine. An' if you want to know, I'm darn glad of it.'

"Then, Pan, she began to cuss me, an' I jumps up mad, but right dignified an' says, 'Mrs. Somers, I'll require you to stop usin' profanity.'

" '*Mrs. Somers!*' she whispers, her eyes poppin'. 'Are you crazy?' An' I told her thet my name wasn't Moran, but Somers.

"She gave a gasp an' fell back in the wagon. An' you bet I run fer you. Now, pard, for Gawd's sake, what'll I do?" finished Blinky with a groan.

"Cowboy, you've done noble," replied Pan in great satisfaction. "But don't worry another minute. I can fix it up with Louise."

With that, Pan strode across the grass to Blinky's wagon. "Morning, Louie, how are you?" he began.

"I don't know," she replied. "Pan, am I that cowboy's wife?"

"Yes," he replied gravely.

"Did he force me to marry him when I was drunk?"

"No. Blink is innocent of all except loving you, Louie," answered Pan, choosing his words. "It was *I* who forced you to marry him."

She covered her eyes with her hands and pressed hard as if to make clear her bewildering thoughts. "Oh, I—I can't remember."

"Louie, don't distress yourself," he said soothingly. "You bet *I* can remember, and I'll tell you."

"Wait. I want to get up. But you forgot my clothes. I can't go round in a blanket."

"By golly, I never thought of that. But you're about the same height as Lucy. I'll borrow some of her clothes for you."

"Lucy?" she echoed, staring at him.

"Yes, Lucy," he replied easily. "And while I'm at it, I'll fetch a basin of hot water—and everything."

Later, when he presented himself before Louise, he scarcely recognized her in the prim, comely change of apparel. The atmosphere of the Yellow Mine had vanished. She had managed to eat some breakfast. Blinky discreetly found a task that took him away.

"We've a little time to talk now, Louie," said Pan. "They'll be packing the wagons." He led her under the cottonwoods.

"Pan, why did you do this thing?"

"Because my friend loves you and you told me you tried to keep him away from you—that if you didn't you would like him too well," answered Pan. "Blink

had never been any good in the past. But his heart was big. Then you were going straight to hell. Well, I thought, here's an opportunity to make a man out of my friend, and save a girl who hasn't had a chance. I never hesitated about taking advantage of you. That was only a means to an end. So I planned it and did it."

"But, Pan—how impossible!" she replied brokenly. "Blink might have been what you said, but still I—I'm no fit wife for him."

"You *can* be," went on Pan with strong feeling. "Just blot out the past. Begin now. Blink will make a good man, a successful rancher. He has money enough to start with. No matter what you call yourself, you're the only girl he ever loved."

"Pan, you talk—like—oh, you make me think of what might have been," she cried. "But I'll not consent. I'll not give men the right to point their fingers at Blink. I'll run away—or—or kill myself."

"Louie, that is silly talk," censured Pan sharply. "Could you come to love my friend—in time—I mean? That's the great thing."

"I believe I love him now," she murmured. "That's why I *can't* risk it. Someone who knew me would turn up. To disgrace my husband—and children, if I had any."

"Not one chance in a million," flashed Pan. "We're going far—into another country. Besides, everyone in Marco believes you lost your life in the fire."

"What—fire?"

"The Yellow Mine burned. Dick Hardman in it, and a girl they took for you."

Suddenly Louise leaped up, ghastly pale. "I remember now—Blink came to my room. I wouldn't let him in. Then you came. I let you in when all the time Dick Hardman was hiding in my closet."

"I knew you had him hidden."

"You meant to kill him! The yellow dog! He came to me when I was sick in bed. He begged me to hide him. And I did. Then you talked to me, as you're talking now. Blink came with the whisky. Oh, I see it all now!"

"Sure. And Louie—you told me Hardman said he'd marry you, and that someday when you were drunk you'd do it. And then I told you Hardman had forced my sweetheart, Lucy, to marry him."

"*What?* He did that?"

"Reckon he did. I got there too late. But I drove him off to get a gun. Then he hid there with you. I told you he couldn't marry you when he already had a wife. You went crazy then. You betrayed Hardman. He came rushing out of the closet. Well, I left him lying in the hall! I grabbed you—wrapped you in a blanket—and ran out. Blink shot out the lights in the saloon. We got away. The place burned up, with some girl they took for you—and Hardman—"

"My God! Burned alive?"

"No," replied Pan hoarsely.

"Pan—you—you avenged me—and your Lucy—you—?" she whispered, clinging to him.

"Hush! Don't speak it! Don't ever *think* it again," he said sternly. "That's our secret. Rumor has it he fled from me to hide with you, and you were both burned up."

"But Lucy—your mother!" she cried.

"They know nothing except that you're my friend's wife—that you've been ill," he replied. "They're all kindness and sympathy. Play your part now, Louise. You and Blink make up

your past. Just a few simple statements . . . Then bury the past forever."

Four days on the way to Siccane! The travelers to the far country had become like one big family.

So far Pan had carried on his pretense of aloofness from Lucy, apparently blind to the wondering appeal in her eyes. Long ago he had forgiven her. Yet he waited, divining surely that some day or night when an opportune moment came, she would voice the question in her eyes.

That very evening when he went to fetch water she waylaid him.

"Panhandle Smith, you are *killing* me! I won't stand it longer."

"What is it you won't stand?" teased Pan.

But suddenly Lucy broke down. "Don't. Don't keep it up," she cried desperately. "I know it was a terrible thing to do. But I told you why. I *couldn't* have gone away with him—after I'd seen you."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. I was mad enough to think you might—even care for him."

"Pan, I love only you. All my life it's been only you."

"Lucy! Tomorrow we ride into Green River. Will you marry me there?"

"Yes—if you—love me," she whispered, going close to him.

THE END

DAT HORSE SHE'S SMART!

By RAFE GIBBS

"Four-Legs," the educated mare, dutifully took good care of "No-Legs," her colorful but handicapped master.

"SO, I no get ballot for my horse, eh? By Gar, for one soggy pancake, I make kindling dis voting joint so's nobody can put him together again."

The precinct clerk of those early days in Butte, Montana, his Adam's apple bobbing as if a trout were on it, gazed at the speaker. There seemed little doubt that the threat could be carried out, board by board.

"Joe No-Legs"—Joseph Baptiste Meloche—had no legs left beneath the knees, but he had a boilerlike chest to which were appended piston-rod arms. A French-Canadian, he had been a woodcutter for many years and could lick any man his size in the timber before and after losing his legs.

"But let's be sensible 'bout dis," continued No-Legs. "Dat horse—she's smarter dan anybody in Silvair Bow County. She's made oop her mind like me to vote for Pat Mullins.* He's good mayor. We vote him in again—me and my horse."

"I—I'm sorry," protested the clerk. "But a horse—why, we don't even let women vote."

"Keep de women outta dis. We are talk 'bout somebody with brains—a horse dat—Oh, t' hell with it. If my horse no vote for Pat Mullins, I no vote for him neider."

And out stalked Joe No-Legs, growling about the lack of respect for animal wisdom, of which his horse, "Four-Legs," indeed was heavily endowed, to the continual amazement and amusement of the teeming mining center early in the current century. The horse, a dusty mare, was smart enough, in fact, to rate living-quarters in No-Legs's house, sleeping in the bedroom beside him. But perhaps we are one horse ahead of the story.

No-Legs acquired the other horse concerned—a sturdy bay—when his woodcutting job for the mines petered out and he went into the new business of tin-can rustling. Now, at first blush this doesn't sound like much of a business,

*Pat Mullins was the famous Butte mayor, who, following the defeat of eleven aldermen he disliked, staged a lavish feast for them just so he could make a speech rubbing in their misfortune at the polls.

but it was really quite profitable. The mines then needed all the old tin cans they could get for copper-precipitating processes, and, with a wagon drawn by the bay, No-Legs daily rounded up hundreds of cans.

Life for No-Legs and the horse was beautiful—in a moderate sort of way. No-Legs had a fortresslike but comfortable house built out of old railroad ties on the southwest edge of Butte. The horse had a stable, also built out of ties, but not quite so comfortable. It had no heat. Still, it was adequate until the winter of 1905.

That was a bad one. The mercury would toboggan way down below zero and take days climbing back up. Probably the least concerned in Butte was No-Legs.

Rattling up to a mine with a load of tin cans, he would roar at miners hurrying to shafts over the crunching snow:

"You should be like me with no legs. Den you get only half so damn cold."

No-Legs, who was inclined to jest about most things in life, made no exception about his lack of legs. It was generally believed that he had lost them in a railroad accident, but that wasn't the way he often told it:

"I drive team horses down hill with a load of wood. Dat hill she's shoot down like church steeple. Brakes on wagon, dey don't hold worth damn. Horses gallop. Only one t'ing for dis Cayuse Frenchman to do. I use dem two legs of mine for rough-lock all the way down dat hill. At bottom, I take look. No legs. I wear dem off, but get new name. Joe No-Legs, dat's me."

But there was no jesting for No-Legs the morning following a blizzard in that winter of 1905. The wind had hurled snow at the railroad-tie buildings all night. Twice No-Legs had tried to go out to have a look at his horse, but each time he was beaten back by the blizzard.

Then came morning. Still. Bitter cold. His breath a fog before him, No-Legs broke snow to the stable, pried open the door with a shovel. On the floor lay the bay, frozen to death. The rough, tough Frenchman who could laugh at no legs for himself, wept at the sight of the stiffened legs of his horse.

Later, in a Butte saloon, No-Legs declared:

"By Gar, dis is terrible t'ing happen. I get nodder horse, but dis terrible t'ing nevair happen again. Nodder horse sleep in warm bedroom with me."

And so it was. No-Legs acquired the mare, Four-Legs, and moved his cot over to the side of the bedroom, so the animal could stretch out on straw in comfort. No-Legs insisted the horse was "neater dan me." Friends concurred.

No-Legs, who was in the habit of leaving his clothes where they fell when he disrobed, trained the horse to pick them up with her teeth and hang them on pegs. Four-Legs, according to her master, got so she couldn't sleep if something were left lying about.

"Just like old woman," No-Legs beamed proudly to his cronies. "Always picking up after her man."

Mornings were never dull in the railroad-tie house. An early riser, Four-Legs wanted breakfast as soon as she was up, so would go over to the slumbering No-Legs and yank his blankets off. If that didn't rouse him, the mattress came next.

"By Gar, some day I keel you for dat," No-Legs would threaten. But they were hollow-shelled words. No-Legs loved that horse.

He would and did give Four-Legs the overcoat off his back. One cold day the horse began to shiver after working up a sweat in an uphill climb, and No-Legs stopped the wagon to throw his coat over the horse. After that it was No-Legs who did the shivering, although he denied being cold.

"Lucky for me," he said, "I got more hair on chest dan horse."

Four-Legs became most valuable in collecting tin cans. Seldom did one elude her. As the wagon clattered down alleys, No-Legs sometimes dozed, but not Four-Legs. When she spotted a tin can, she stopped abruptly. That was the signal for No-Legs to get out and pick up the can. Often he did this and got back into the wagon without fully awakening. Butte kids tried to fool Four-Legs by placing paper oatmeal boxes in her path, but she sniffed at them disdainfully and passed on by.

No-Legs claimed the horse also knew which saloons had the biggest "five-cent schoonairs" of beer, and would always stop at one of these when the master got thirsty, which was frequently. Whether or not Four-Legs had made a study of the respective sizes of suds containers, she was familiar with No-Legs's favorite haunts and often stopped at one without urging.

No-Legs would then march into the saloon, pound the brass bar rail smartly with his fist, and declare in a loud voice:

"Now dat is one smart horse—smarter dan me. She's stop at dis saloon because she's know it got biggest schoonair in Butte."

Sometimes, if there were a crowd, this bit of free advertising would bring forth a beer on the house, and No-Legs would go into the finale of the act. This consisted of taking the beer out on the street and letting Four-Legs blow off the foam.

"By Gar, dat horse she's making me one lazy Cayuse Frenchman," No-Legs would chuckle. "Maybe I retire and let her run whole business."

Arguments among Butte folk were heated and many as to whether Four-Legs was naturally smarter than the average horse, or whether she got that way from the unusually close relationship with a human being. Her smartness was enough to attract the attention of a horse trainer traveling with a circus that played Butte. The trainer frankly admitted that Four-Legs was the smartest horse he had ever seen, and wanted to buy her.

On hearing this No-Legs roared with laughter.

"Lees'en," he said. "I am crawl on desert. I am die of thirst. Then I see you. You got barrel of beer. Six feet high. You say, 'Joe No-Legs, you have all dis beer you swap me horse.' Know what I do? I lay down in shade dat barrel and die—but NO SWAP!"

No-Leg's devotion to his horse gave his friends some concern, because they knew that if anything happened to Four-Legs it would break the Frenchman's heart. Matter of fact, folks were more concerned about something happening to Four-Legs than to No-Legs. For one thing, the horse took such good care of her master that no one considered the possibility of disaster befalling him.

In those days Butte was a great town for holding wakes to pay proper

respects to a departed one. And, especially if said individual had not led too meritorious a life laudatory remarks from the living flowed much easier after the imbibing of spiritous liquors. No-Legs, not being one to pass up free drinks, attended many wakes. Of course, his attendance record was not on a par with such famous Butte wakegoers as "Paddy the Ghoul" and "Mary the Ghost," but he got around to a lot of wakes.

He could scuttle a whole fleet of drinks "without wobble in legs, because got no legs," but every now and then he required looking after by fellow wakegoers. This was simple. The friends merely pitched No-Legs into the back end of his wagon, and gave a slap on the rump to Four-Legs. No-Legs was as good as home.

The horse knew the way, and unerringly weaved through city traffic to the railroad-tie home. The same thing happened when No-Legs tarried too long and well at a saloon. Butte residents became used to the sight of the driverless wagon and thought nothing of it.

The jostling ride in the open air usually sobered up No-Legs enough so that upon arrival home he would get out of the wagon, unhitch, and go into the house with Four-Legs. If No-Legs didn't come 'round immediately upon reaching home, the horse just stood and waited. She never played pranks on her master when he was under the weather.

The system worked fine until Butte was beset on the night of January 26, 1928, with a heavy fog, The grayness became like a thousand heavy curtains drawn through the busy mining metropolis.

Caught uptown in the fog at a saloon was No-Legs. And he was in a fog in more ways than one. The "schoonairs" had been many.

" 'Tain't a fit night to send him home," declared one crony. "No man can get a wagon safe through that fog."

"Aye," said another, "but a horse can—a horse like No-Legs's. She'll take the wagon straight home like an arrow to its mark."

There were more arguments about the feasibility of sending No-Legs home and more quaffing of beer, but finally it was decided that Four-Legs, cold sober, could take care of her master. Into the back end of the wagon went No-Legs. Someone prodded the horse, and shouted:

"Git for home!"

Four-Legs, who never disobeyed a command, got.

Those who discerned the shadowy wagon passing through the night fog said it was a marvelous thing to see. Four-Legs weaved around parked vehicles, and circled street repairs without mishap. Then she came to a main intersection—at the same time as a streetcar. The motorman did not see the lightless, driverless wagon through the fog, and Four-Legs—who was getting along in years and not so sharp anymore—evidently did not see the streetcar.

A woman standing on the corner screamed warning. But the scream was buried by an avalanche of bumping, crashing sounds as the streetcar careened into the wagon and horse. Four-Legs was dead before motorman and passengers got out to investigate the tragedy. No-Legs died later that night in a hospital.

In one night, Butte had lost two of its most colorful characters.

The Claimer and the Cowboy

By S. OMAR BARKER

Pete's big sister figures Smoky Cameron has a cruel streak in him, and it takes Pete's pet, Old Liney, to show Sis how wrong she is!

THIS is a story about a kid and a cow that loved mountains, and a girl who thought a cowboy was cruel.

The spring I was six Pa told me to pick me out a heifer. I felt pretty proud. Pa hadn't let Sis and Todd claim their calves till they were eight. But I was the baby.

I named my claimer Liney because she was reddish-yellow with a speckly white line all the way down her back. I sure did love that calf. Pa said if I didn't pet her to death, like as not she would raise me a nice start by the time I was old enough to quit chewing pine gum and marry a grass widow. Pa was a stern, God-fearing man, but he liked to josh us.

I made all the pet out of my calf that she would stand for. Sis petted her right smart too. Sis was twelve then, with silk-fuzzy honey-colored pigtails, big, serious blue eyes, and an awful tender heart. Her name was Mary Lee, but we called her Sis. I reckon I was her pet almost like Liney was mine.

We learned the calf to come when I swooked her and lick sugar out of my hand. She let me swing onto her tail

when Sis and I drove the milk-pen calves to pasture. But she never did gentle quite like she ought. She liked to hide out in a patch of quaking asps at the far end of the pasture of an evening and not come till I called her.

I took it for granted that Liney would be a milk-penner, but when she freshened the spring I was eight, she didn't give enough milk to squirt in a cat's eye. I had to beg Pa not to throw her with the outside cattle. It wasn't only her scanty milk. She kicked anybody but me, and if old Towser came around outside the cowpen she even went spooky on me. It was the streak of longhorn in her.

She was always trying to steal her calf off over the mountain to the outside cattle. You sure couldn't blame her for that. Big Lonesome Creek and Mesa, with their fine grass meadows and quaking-asp parks, were a natural heaven for cattle—a fine green heaven, wild and free.

Liney didn't make much more bag with her second calf than her first. So when I accidentally let her calf slip out with her one morning and couldn't swook her back, Ma said let her go gallyger. I begged Pa to send me and Todd over to Big Lonesome the next Sunday to fetch her back, but he said no.

"You can claim you a gentler heifer if you want to, Pete," he told me, "but I don't aim to waste home pasture on that lineback for the little squirt of milk she gives."

Whenever Pa Shelburn laid it on the taw line, that settled it. But I didn't want to claim another heifer. Whatever happened to her, Liney was mine for keeps.

After that every time anybody rode over to Big Lonesome to salt the outside cattle, I went along, even if I had to ride old Slocum bareback, just to keep tabs on my cow. By August Liney and her calf had got so sleek and fat that I was right proud we had turned them out.

Pa always gathered his cattle by hollering "swook!" They would hear him two miles off and come a-running for their salt. The way Liney would come sashaying down the hill I thought she was the prettiest thing I ever did look at. The line on her back was as white as the quaking-asp trunks and her silky sides gleamed like gold.

It fretted me some when she begun getting a little wild, but I could see how proud she was to be running free with her calf 'way out there on Big Lonesome.

IT was the spring I was thirteen and Sis nineteen that Smoky Cameron came a-courtin'. With less than a hundred head of cattle, us Shelburns weren't what you could call real cowfolks. Smoky Cameron was. He rode for the big Slash D outfit out on the flats. He wore spurs on his heels and had cowboy ways. He hadn't come to see Sis more than three or four times till I thought he was just about it.

Sis must have, too, else she wouldn't have come out to the cowpen to watch the branding. She never had before. Sis was awful chicken-hearted about hurting things. So was I, but Pa expected me and Todd to help; and whenever Pa expected you to do anything you either done it or took a whipping.

We always roped the calves on foot, any old way we could, but Smoky rode his horse right into the cowpen. The

loop of his lass rope would flick down and pick up a calf by the heels every time. It was something to marvel at. I was glad Sis had come out to watch. She stood inside the plank gate by the big pine where we hung the calf ropes, looking awful pretty in her best blue sunbonnet and a fresh ironed dress.

Smoky made his horse prance right up to her, maybe showing off a little. He was a strong-built, medium-tall man with coal-black hair and eyes purt near the same. His back looked awful long and straight, maybe from the low way he wore his cowboy overalls.

Sis gave her head a sassy little toss, and I could see what a bright-eyed smile she flashed at him.

"Too bad you aren't as pretty as your horse, mister cowboy!"

Smoky made out like he aimed to rope the sunbonnet right off her head. He laughed his deep, chuckly laugh when she threw up her hands to ward off the rope. Then he thumbed his horse in the shoulder just enough to make him kick up a little and rode on after the next calf.

I was only a rusty-knuckled button of thirteen, but I savvied that Smoky's little horseplay was just his cowboy way of letting Sis know he was mighty proud she was there. Her cheeks got rosy and the way her big blue eyes looked after him, I knew she liked him all right. I wondered if Pa and Todd noticed it, too.

"You reckon Sis is fixin' to marry ol' Smoky?" I asked them.

Todd was sixteen and not interested in cattle, people, or much of anything else except hunting and fishing. He shrugged and made a noise with his lips.

"You boys 'tend to your rat killin'!" said Pa. "Them irons are gittin' cold!"

I don't know what got into Sis to make her come on around the fence to watch us brand the next calf right close. Smoky had been learning me and Todd how to flank them down, but this was an extra-big heifer and we didn't down her the first try.

Smoky stepped off his horse and showed us how it was done. Reaching over her back to paralyze the flank muscle with his right hand and lift her front quarters off the ground with his left, he flopped the heifer so sudden and hard you could hear the wind swoosh right out of her.

I knew he didn't do it just to show off, though I reckon you couldn't blame a man if he sort of liked for his girl to notice how strong he was. It must have surprised him the view Sis took of it.

"For gosh sakes, Smoky!" she exclaimed. "You don't have to handle the poor thing so rough!"

"Not if you can tell me some way to lay one down easy," grinned the cowboy.

Sis didn't say anything.

I fetched Pa the hot iron. When he pressed it to the heifer's hip she let out a beller that gargled the same way old Deacon Loftis used to sing *How Firm a Foundation.* It was a plumb comic sound, and even as sorry as I was for the calf, I purt near couldn't keep from laughing.

Smoky didn't even try. He let that big cheerful chuckle of his roll right out.

"Shame on you!" cried Sis. "Branding is cruel enough anyway, without you laughing about it!"

Her lips were drawn tight and her cheeks had lost their roses. Smoky looked at her a long moment, sort of battling his dark eyes, then let the calf

up and went to his horse. I thought he looked sort of stiff in the back.

"First thing *you* know, Sis," warned Todd with a grin, "you'll have to be huntin' you another feller!"

"I don't care!" Sis's pretty chin went up another notch. "He didn't have to laugh at that poor calf!"

"Mary Lee," said Pa, gentle but stern, "if I was you I'd run on back to the house and help your ma' get dinner!"

Sis stopped just outside the gate. Maybe she figured that if Smoky saw her waiting there, he would come and smooth down her feathers with a little sweet talk. But Smoky just went on and heeled another calf. After Todd and me wrastled it down we had to wait a minute for the irons to heat, and I figured maybe a little cow talk would sort of take Smoky's mind off of the strange ways of women.

Liney was dry that year, but she was there in the pen with the rest of the cattle, so sleek and fat that I was plumb proud of her.

"Look, Smoky!" I pointed with my chin. "Ain't that yellow lineback the purtiest cow you ever did see?"

"I've been noticin' her," Smoky nodded. "Coyote get her calf?"

Pan shook his head. "This is the third year she's missed."

"When they git thataway on the Slash D," observed Smoky, "by godfrey, we ship 'em out for beef!"

"Liney's my claimer," I said stoutly, "an' by godfrey, I ain't fixin' to beef her!"

"Mind your language, Pete!" said Pa sharply.

"I expect you mean I'd better watch mine, Mr. Shelburn," grinned Smoky.

"You're a man grown an' free to speak as you please," said Pa. "But 'by godfrey' has a bad sound on the tongue of a boy."

By then the irons were hot. Instead of another calf, the next critter Smoky dragged out of the bunch was an old crumple-horned cow with her nose all swelled up.

"Looks like porcupine quills, Mr. Shelburn. Maybe we can throw her an' work 'em out."

He had roped her by the horns. With her nose all sore like it was, the old cow was on the fight. That didn't bother Smoky. He snubbed her to a post, picked up her heels with a second rope, and stretched her out in a hurry. By the time he had got a dozen porky quills out of her nose, old crumple-horn was feeling plenty snuffy.

"This ol' gal's gonna fight," said Smoky, sober as a judge. "You want to git on the fence, Pete, before I let her up?"

I wanted to, all right, but I sure didn't aim to admit it.

"Shucks, no! I ain't scared of no ol' cow!"

"Then you better stand here." He motioned me a little to one side and back of the down cow. "She'll prob'ly take after the first thing in front of her when she gits up. Ready now, boys?"

I reckon I was an idiot not to suspect the monkey business. Smoky held the cow down by twisting her head while Pa and Todd got the ropes off, then suddenly he jumped to her tail, grabbed it, and pulled her around so that she got up headed straight my way.

Smoky had been right about what she would do. We must have made quite a parade, streaking off across the cowpen, me in the lead, old crumple-horn snuffing right at the seat of my pants, and Smoky aholt of her tail.

I never suspected I could run that fast nor jump that high. They tell me I took off like a wild turkey and sailed on over the plank gate with inches to spare. I heard the old cow's horns whack the planks right under me, then Smoky Cameron's deep, chuckling laugh. He tail-swung the cow around and stepped up on the gate. He reached my lost hat toward me.

"You'll make a foot racer yet, Pete!" he chuckled. "A little more wind in your shirt tail an' you'd have sailed right on to Texas!"

I took the hat, but I didn't say thank you. I knew now that he had fixed it on purpose so the cow would chase me. I was mad, and I let right in to cuss him. Not just "doggones" and "by godfreys," but the worst swear words I could think of.

I hadn't realized till then that Sis was still standing right there beside the gate.

"Hush up such talk, Pete!" she warned me. "Pa'll hear you!"

She turned to Smoky. His chuckle was fading out in a funny, surprised look.

"Shame on you!" Sis burst out with fire in her eyes. "Don't you realize you might have got the boy bad hurt?"

"Not at the speed he was travelin'!' Smoky allowed himself one more chuckle, then sure enough sobered down. "Why, it was all just a little joke, honey!" His deep, slow voice sounded almost pleading. He straddled on over the gate and would have put his arm around her shoulders if she hadn't moved away. "Honest, honey, I never aimed—"

"Don't you call me 'honey,' Smoky Cameron! You—you're a mean, cruel man!" Sis didn't sound just mad. She sounded like she was purt near ready to cry.

Smoky fished out the makin's and started to roll a smoke, then wadded the brown paper between his thumb and finger, threw it down, and put the tobacco sack back in his vest. He didn't look any happier than Sis did.

Maybe he would have figured out some way to soothe her if a new country hadn't been heard from right then. It was Pa. He came through the gate with a calf rope in his hand. I wanted to run, but I knew it was no use. Pa didn't pay any attention to Sis and Smoky.

"Pete," he said, "I heard you swearin', an' I won't have it! You come around behind this tree an' take your whippin'!"

"Hold on a minute, Mr. Shelburn?" said Smoky. "Any swearin' this boy done, it was my fault. If you're goin' to whip anybody, you'd better whip me!"

Pa stood there a minute, sort of rubbing his grayish chin whiskers and looking the young cowboy in the eye like he figured he could do it all right if he had to. He didn't look to be mad at Smoky any more than he ever looked mad at me or Todd whenever he was fixing to punish us. He never whipped either of us very often, but when he did he done it like a duty.

"My young friend," he told Smoky quietly, "you joked this boy purty rough, but I take it you didn't mean him any harm. I've gone to the fence a few times my ownself an' I don't know as it ever hurt me. But I aim for my boys to learn that nothin' *ever* excuses them for takin' the Lord's name in vain. I'll thank you to step aside!"

I could see that Pa had him between a rock and a hard place, but I sure

didn't want to see any trouble. I started around behind the tree.

"Come on, Pa," I said, "I'm ready."

It looked for a second like Smoky was still going to try and stop him, but he finally didn't. After all, it was Pa's cowpen, Pa's young'un—and Pa's calf rope.

Four wallops was all he gave me, but hard ones. I somehow made out not to squall. I was afraid if I did Sis or Smoky might try to stop it—and no telling what, if they did. But it was pretty hard to keep from blubbering when we came out from behind the tree and Sis put her arm around my shoulders. She didn't say anything to Pa, but there was a quiver about her lips that looked like she wanted to.

"Pete," said Pa in the gentle way he always had of speaking to any of us just after he had punished us, "I wish you an' Mary Lee would run to the house an' see if your ma can spare us a pitcher of cold buttermilk."

As we started off, I heard Smoky speak to Pa mighty earnest: "I'm sure sorry this happened, Mr. Shelburn."

"I noticed you kept aholt of the cow's tail so she couldn't ketch him," Pa answered. "By ginger, the boy's right smart of a runner, though, ain't he?"

When I came back with a pitcher of buttermilk, the smoke was rising from hot iron on calf hide again.

Smoky didn't tell me he was sorry he had got me whipped, but he did offer to let me climb on his cowhorse and see how I could make out heeling a calf with his cowboy rope. I sure did want to try it, but I didn't.

"No thanks," I told him. "I might git the rope tangled an' git whipped for swearin' again!"

Smoky grinned at me. But all through the rest of the branding I didn't hear him laugh a single time.

We had the last calf smoking when Ma hollered us in for dinner, so Pa left the turn-out till later.

Ma never was any hand to discourage courting. Usually she set Smoky next to Sis. Once I'd seen them hold hands while Pa was saying his company grace. But this time Sis sat clear over across the table. I never had seen her act so polite and prissy before. The dessert was rhubarb pie, and Ma looked at Smoky to mention that Sis had made it. I reckon Smoky had got tired of everybody acting so solemn. He spoke without smiling, but there was something twinklesome about his dark eyes.

"Mighty fine pie, Mrs. Shelburn. Looks like your daughter is as good a cook as your son is a foot racer!"

I could tell by the way Ma reached over and patted my head that she knew what he was joking about. Todd snickered. Pa gave a little chuckle and Smoky let his deep laugh roll out, big and good-natured. But Sis only looked down at her plate.

"By ginger, I can cuss purt near as good as I can run, too!" I spoke up, sassy as I dared, and Pa quick changed the subject to tell Smoky he had an old horse he'd like for him to look at out at the barn.

I slipped off to the cowpen with a handful of brown sugar to see if ol' Liney would still let me pet her. She acted pretty wild, but finally lapped her tongue out for the sugar and let me stroke her silky neck a couple.

When Pa and Smoky came to sort the milk-penners from the outside cattle and turn them out, Liney was the first through the gate. She struck out

eagerly up the trail toward Big Lonesome, head-high and happy.

I reckon we all knew that Smoky hadn't made the long ride up from the flats just to help Pa brand. If he hadn't expected to stay over for some Sunday courting he wouldn't have come in the first place. Sis had been having the fidgets all week for fear he wouldn't come, but now when he waited on the porch she stayed in the house.

I made out to be busy pulling weeds out of Ma's pansy beds. Smoky had fetched his lariat with him from the saddle shed. After he had rolled three or four of his brown-paper cigarettes, he came to the end of the porch, gave his rope a careless fling, and snared my shoulders.

"I'll thank you to keep your dang rope off of me," I said, jerking free of the loop.

"It's your rope, Pete." Smoky made about half a chuckle. "If you're ever goin' to learn to heel calves you got to have something to practice with besides them dishrag calf ropes!"

It took me a minute to realize he was really aiming to give it to me. Then I didn't have the manners to thank him.

"Well, gee!" I gulped. "Say, I'll go see if I can find Sis for you!"

"Forget it!" said Smoky sharply. "She knows I'm here."

I went anyhow. I found Sis upstairs sitting on the edge of her bed, just sort of staring.

"We've done turned the cows out," I said. "Smoky's on the porch."

She didn't say anything.

"He never aimed to let that cow ketch me, Sis. He had holt of her tail. I ain't mad any more about him getting me whipped."

"That calf was suffering," said Sis, "and he laughed about it."

"Aw, shucks, Sis! I thought you was sure 'nough fixin' to marry him!"

I reckoned by the look in her eyes that she had thought so, too.

"I—I won't ever marry any man that's cruel, Pete! Not *ever!*"

"Aw, shucks, Sis!" It was all I could think of to say.

When I got back downstairs Smoky was nowheres in sight. Sis came out on the porch a few minutes later, her hair all fresh combed and everything.

Smoky was riding up from the barn toward the out road down the canyon. He had on his chaps and his six-shooter. His slicker roll was tied on behind the saddle. He rode slow because he was leading the poor old bony horse we called Slocum. I knew what that meant. I reckon Sis did, too.

When a horse gets that old and poor there ain't but one right thing to do, only Pa never had the heart to do it his ownself. We knew he had been wishing he could get somebody to take old Slocum off somewhere and shoot him. I sure hated it that it turned out to be Smoky. Now Sis would sure 'nough think he didn't have any feeling in his heart for animals. I could see it in her face.

"It's just one of them jobs *somebody* has got to do, Sis!" I said. "Whyn't you holler an' invite him to come on back when he gits done?"

Smoky waved his hat as he rode past the yard. Sis waved back. But it was a good-by kind of wave, and Smoky rode on off down the canyon.

Sis sat down on the top step and cried a little. When I thought about all the times I'd rode old Slocum, and how it was that horses and cows have to take it however their people deal it, I was half a notion to help Sis a little with her crying, myownself.

But I didn't figure it was old Slocum that she was mainly crying about.

SMOKY CAMERON didn't show up any more that summer, and Sis went around with a sad look in her eyes that made a feller either want to try and comfort her—or take a strap to her.

I kept telling her all she had to do was write him, and I bet he'd come a-whoopin'. It looked plumb silly to me that she wouldn't. But I reckon it wasn't just an ordinary quarrel that had come between her and Smoky.

It was along in September that the cattle buyer came. He was a red-faced butcher from Los Prados. We rode over to Big Lonesome and Pa swooked in the cattle and pointed out the fat ones he wanted to sell. It was more than he usually sold every fall, because he was fixing to send Todd and me to school in town that winter and needed the money.

My heart sank right down and dragged in the mud when Pa pointed out old Liney. Running dry for three summers, she sure looked sleek and pretty. The long slim curve of her polished horns gleamed in the sun.

"I don't want to go to school if we got to sell ol' Liney to pay for it, Pa," I said.

"We can't afford to keep cows that don't fetch calves," Pa answered firmly. "You're old enough to know that, Pete."

I knew he was right, but I sure hated it.

The butcher bought eighteen steers and dry cows, including old Liney. Pa promised to deliver them October tenth. The butcher took quite a shine to Sis. I wished he'd go on home, but he stayed plumb till after dinner the next day.

"Make sure you drive them cattle easy, Shelburn," he advised Pa at the dinner table. "Don't chouse all the fat off of 'em!"

"That's a heap easier said than done," Pa told him. "It runs down every horse we've got just to shove a little bunch of these mountain cattle off the place." He paused to look at Sis. "I wish we was goin' to have a good regular cowhand or two to help us."

"I know a good 'un that would come help us if a certain party was to write to him," I said.

Sis blushed and looked down at her plate. She knew who I meant. But as far as I knew, she didn't write to Smoky —and I was the one that always took the mail.

The mountains were all gold-splashed with autumn qualking asps the day we brought the sold cattle down and penned them up for an early start the next morning. I never had seen Big Lonesome Mesa look so pretty, nor the cattle either—specially old Liney.

At crisp sunup the next morning we headed them down the road. Pa and Todd and me rode the best horses. Ma and Sis togged out in overalls and climbed on the light work team to help what they could. Pa knew it would take us all, and maybe then some, to get them past where a couple of old trails turned off toward Big Lonesome. Once past those hazards, Ma could probably come on back, but Sis would have to help another five or six miles, maybe all the way.

Old Liney was the first to make a bust for the timber, a couple of the steers right at her tail. But Pa and me were both watching for it. After a hard, leg-skinning run through the brush,

we finally shagged them back into the road. Of course I felt sorry for old Liney, but all the same it was sure a fine feeling to tear out on a strong, surefooted horse and find out you had the stuff to head 'em if you had to.

An old roan steer took to the willows, and when I come shaggin' him back in all by myself, whoopin' and swinging one end of the lariat Smoky had given me, Sis gave me a wide smile.

"Hi, *cowboy!*" she called out.

It made me sit up in the saddle right proud.

A mile farther on old Liney made a break for an old trail that took off up Wildcat Canyon, and before you could say Jack Robinson the whole bunch was on the run, scattering to the timber in twos and threes like a bunch of jumped deer. Such whooping and hollering and brush crashing as we made trying to head them off, you never did hear. It sure looked like we were going to lose 'em all. We would have, too, if a new country hadn't suddenly been heard from.

When the scattered cattle funneled into the mouth of Wildcat Canyon, hellbent to hit the old trail to Big Lonesome, there was Smoky Cameron setting on his horse in a narrows smackdab ahead of them. That old cowboy sure brought 'em foggin' back down to the road in a hurry.

No doubt he had heard us hollering at the cattle as he came riding up the road, and had taken his stand where he thought it would do the most good. He didn't bother with howdies—just waved his hand at everybody in general, and yonder we all went, dusting on down the road with the cattle.

I never will forget that day's long, dusty little cow drive as long as I live. It seemed like those mountain cattle never would give up trying to break back. Three-fourths of the time it was Smoky Cameron that headed them even before the rest of us could get started.

We had a bad time crowding them through the little Mexican *placita* of Los Trigos. It was the first houses besides Pa's that any of them had ever seen, and they went plumb wild-eyed about it. The dogs running out to bark at them spooked them still worse. Old Liney chased one the full length of a long *portal*, knocking over washtubs, flower pots, and everything. Smoky rode right in onto the porch, choused the dog off, and hazed her back into the bunch.

"That ol' lineback of yours is right smart of a cow, Pete," he grinned. "*Hup! Hup! Hi-yah*, you boogers!"

After Los Trigos Ma turned back. Sis could have, too, now that we had a sure-'nough cowboy helping us, but she didn't. I didn't see her say anything to Smoky, nor him to her. In fact it looked to me like they both made it a point not to ride near each other any more than they could help.

By the time we hit Seco Hill the cattle were so road-weary, drag-tailed and dusty, you wouldn't have known them for the fine sleek bunch we'd started with. At the top of Seco Hill you come suddenly out onto a wide open mesa—not a tree, not a hill, not even a scrub-oak clump in sight ahead. From here on the driving would be easy.

It was the first time those mountain cattle had ever seen open country. I remember how they all stopped, threw up their heads, and stared like they had suddenly come to the end of the world. It aches my heart yet to think

of the wild, panicked look in their eyes, especially old Liney's.

Looking back to the west, framed like a picture over a notch in the foothills, I could see the golden knob of a faraway mountain, yellow with autumn quaking asps, line-backed with cream-colored patches of knee-deep bunch grass.

I don't know how far cows can see a thing to know what it is, but I saw old Liney swing her head high, her big eyes wide and staring, and I could have sworn she saw and recognized Big Lonesome Mesa.

I saw Sis watching her, and Smoky, too, a bothered look on his dark face that I had never noticed there before.

A moment ago old Liney had acted as drag-tailed as the rest. Now suddenly she broke away as hard as she could run for the scrub-oak thickets fringing the west side of the barren mesa.

She had caught us all napping. Yonder she went, hell-bent into the thickets, only the tips of her high horns showing as she ran—with Smoky Cameron, too late to head her in the open, spurring hard after her.

I know I hoped she would get away, but the count of cattle Pa had promised the butcher was eighteen, and it was part of my job to see that the tally didn't turn up short. I kicked my pony into a lope and took out to help ol' Smoky.

It must have been half a mile that I followed the sound of old Liney and Smoky's horse crashing through the brush, never able to catch sight of them. Then all at once I came out on the edge of a low rimrock, and yonder in a little open patch in the next draw I saw the cow and the cowboy.

Old Liney was slowly walking a sag-wired fence, looking for a place to break through. Many a time I had seen her jump such a fence as easy as a deer. Now she was so dog-tired her tongue was out, and it had her stopped.

Smoky came riding alongside of her, the loop of his lass rope swinging. I had heard him tell how cowboys sometimes roped cattle too rollicky to drive and tied clogs on their feet. I figured that was what Smoky was fixing to do to poor old Liney now, and I sure hated it.

Then all of a sudden, instead of roping her, Smoky cut in ahead of old Liney, stepped off his horse and jerked open a little old wire gate in the fence that I hadn't even noticed. He slapped Liney on the rump with his hat to hurry her through, and pulled the gate shut behind her.

Tired as she was, old Liney knew what to do. I caught a couple more glimpses of her through the brush. She was heading straight home to Big Lonesome.

I reckon Smoky hadn't known I was there any more than I had known Sis was following us. Now I saw her, setting on old Durgin, just a few yards away. I rode over to her. Neither of us said anything, but her eyes had sort of a full look.

Pretty soon Smoky rode up to where we were.

"Hell of a cowhand I am!" he breezed. "I'll be doggoned if that blamed ol' lineback didn't git away from me!"

"You're a big, soft-hearted liar, Smoky Cameron!" said Sis.

It wasn't what she said as much as the way she said it. Smoky reined his horse over close to hers, so I didn't look any more right then. He still had one long arm reached around her when I did.

"Pete," he said, and his chuckle rolled out big and warm and deep just like it used to, "if you ever tell your Pa on me, by godfrey, I'll take you off behind a tree!"

I reckoned he meant about letting old Liney go free, not about hugging Sis.

I never did tell on him. Neither did I ever tell anybody it was me that had written him to come help us drive the cattle.

RUSTLERS' REBUS

A Western Puzzle by Old Hutch

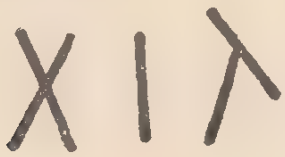
In 1879, John and Charles Farwell of Chicago, with some financial help from British investors, traded the State of Texas a new three-million-dollar capitol building for three million acres of Texas land, taking in all or part of ten Texas counties. This holding was organized into a cattle company, The Capitol Syndicate, and enclosed in "bobwire," then divided into pastures by more of the same until 1500 miles of the stuff had broken the Panhandle free range forever in probably the biggest fencing job in the world. The Syndicate brand was the famous X I T (Ten-in-Texas).

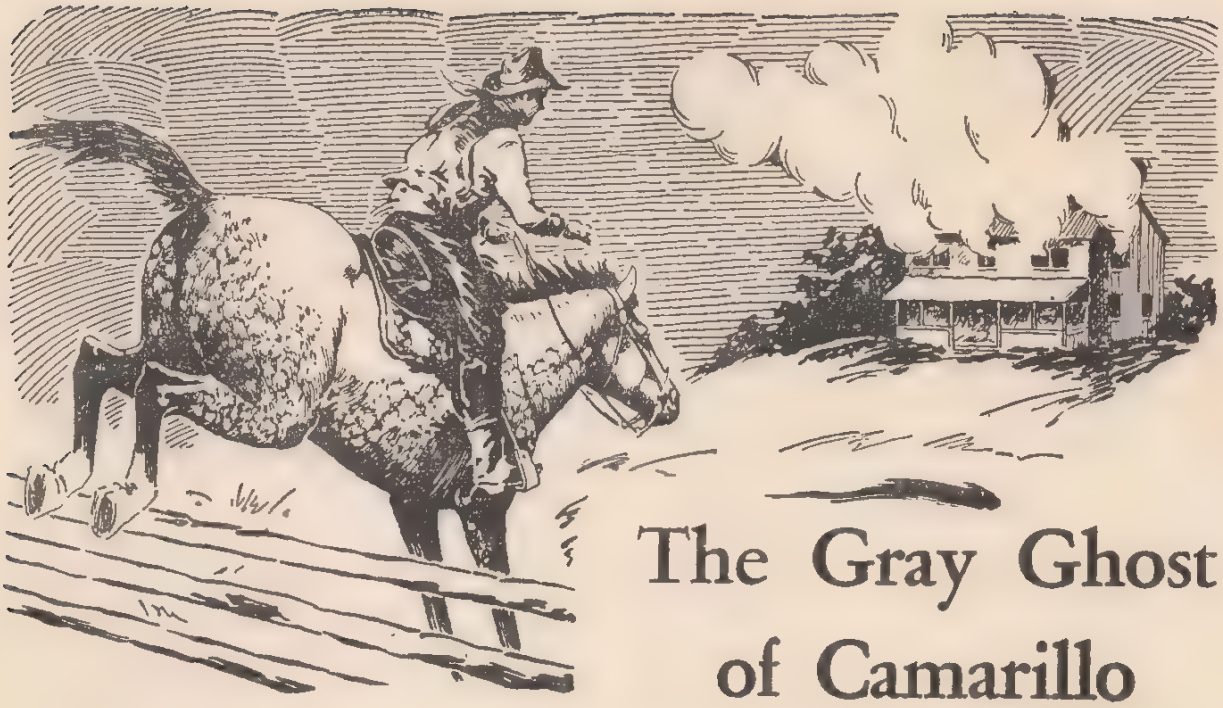
In the long history of the Syndicate, only one man is said ever to have used a running iron to change the X I T into something different for his own profit and gotten away with it. This genius with a hot iron was tried in open court for rewriting the X I T but the cowman jury acquitted him on his plea that his personal brand could not be made from the X I T. Since his own brand was Star Cross, a five-pointed star with a cross in the center, the jury had reason for believing him—they couldn't change it themselves!

But the X I T *could* be run-over into a Star Cross if a man reserved his skill for those animals where the original Syndicate branding iron had slipped, or the natural contours of a cow's hide made the T run "antigodlin" or "slaunchwise."

Here's your sample X I T to change into Star Cross. Try it! (Cowboys still spend more time on it than they do on crossword puzzles). Then see page 132 for the way it was done by the originator, who got $5000 from the Syndicate to stop doing it after the jury had acquitted him!

Syndicate Brand: *Your Star Cross Rewrite:*





The Gray Ghost of Camarillo

By PHILIP KETCHUM

The stallion called "The Gray Ghost" wasn't hard to catch or hard to ride—only hard to explain . . .

DO you love horses? Then visit Camarillo. Go there in the summer, and on a warm afternoon find a place, if you can, on the old oak bench under the giant oak tree in the public square. Maybe a dozen crusty old-timers will be gathered there. Graybeards. Men who are thin, feeble, stoop-shouldered, and whose skin bears the deep and leathery stamp of age. Men whose eyes are now watery and whose vision is dimmed. Men who live in the past, in an age that is gone.

But don't just write them off as old men. They came to this country when the West was young and life was hard. What we have today they made possible, and the story of their struggle is a legend which can stand with any story ever told.

The chances are, however, that you won't hear about the difficulties they faced or the hardships they endured. Now and then, in something they may say, you will catch a hint of it, but that's all. They don't have to boast.

Light up your pipe and lean back and listen. No matter where the talk starts it will eventually get around to horses and when that happens even the most dim and watery eye will brighten at some memory. Be patient. Wait and listen. You will hear the mention of one horse after another by name. You will hear snatches of stories which have no meaning. And then, as always happens, the talk will focus, and you will hear a story which I wager you will never forget, the story of a horse and of people. A story, for instance, like the story of the Gray Ghost of Camarillo.

One man will tell the story. The others will listen, occasionally nodding their heads, occasionally chuckling, and occasionally correcting him on some point, for the story of the Gray Ghost, like every other story, is one they all know, word for word, and one they have recalled many times. Is it true? I can't answer that. But I can say this. The germ of truth is in it, for it rings in the voice of the man telling the story, and in an old, old issue of the *Camarillo Clarion* you can still read the following item:

Joe Crispin left town the other day, headed for the Quemado mountains on a wild-horse hunt. He swears he will not return without the Gray Ghost. Ben Mobridge has posted one hundred dollars as payment for the horse if Joe is lucky enough to rope him.

The story, as you will hear it, goes like this:

Joe Crispin had come to Camarillo from Texas. He was a tall, lanky fellow with an easy grin, a mild and pleasant voice, a shock of sandy hair, and freckles enough for an entire community. He had drifted here just as many another man, for no particular purpose and with nothing in mind but a job which would care for him until he decided to move on again. But the Camarillo country got to Joe Crispin. He liked it. He stayed. When there wasn't a job for him he went hunting in the Quemados or prospecting up along one of the creeks which fed into the Camarillo River.

He had been on a hunting trip late one summer when an evening storm blew up. It was quite a storm. There was lightning and wind, and the skies seemed to have opened up in an effort to wash away the hills. Then, in the way of mountain storms, as quickly as it started, it was over. The skies cleared and were blue again and the birds came out from wherever they went during storms, and sang their evening songs.

Joe had taken shelter under an overhanging cliff on the south side of Table Mountain. He had been soaked by the rain before he reached this shelter and now he was cold, for the chill of the storm was still in the air. He found dry wood close against the cliff and built a huge fire. In the friendly warmth of his fire, he dried out. Then, because he hadn't eaten since morning, he cooked his evening meal.

It was growing dark by this time and Joe wondered if he hadn't found a good place to spend the night. He was on his way back to Camarillo with three bearskins but the moon wouldn't be up for several hours and this wasn't an easy country to travel, even by day Besides, there was really no rush about getting back to town. With no trouble at all, Joe talked himself into staying where he was.

He sat for a while by the fire, dreaming of the days ahead and thinking, probably, of Carol Lancaster, in whom he had recently grown interested and whom he would someday marry. After a final cigarette he made sure his horse was securely tied in a near-by clump of trees, then rolled in his blanket and went almost immediately to sleep.

What woke him he didn't at first know, but he came instantly awake and sat up and looked around. The night was bright with stars. The moon had come out. There was no wind. There were no sounds, anywhere. Over this valley lay a deep and unusual silence, a strange and almost breathless silence.

Joe's body was rigid, but he hardly

knew it. He was listening for something, though what it was, he didn't know. Then behind him he heard a sound, a scuffing sound. He turned his head. Not more than two yards from where he had been lying, stood a horse, a giant stallion whose gray coat was almost silver in the moonlight.

The horse wore no saddle or bridle, or any mark of a saddle or bridle. Its long mane had an unkempt appearance and a bushy forelock showed between the stallion's ears.

Joe caught his breath. He knew horses, and here was a horse, a horse in a thousand. His eyes took in the lines of the stallion's body. Strength and stamina showed in the bulging muscles of shoulder and flank, speed in the long, straight legs, intelligence in the proud, narrow head and the arrogance of the stallion's carriage. Here was a horse which had never been tamed. Joe could sense this. It was his guess that the stallion had come across him unaware, and was as startled as he.

"Hello, boy," said Joe Crispin.

The stallion didn't move, didn't wheel and dash away as Joe had expected.

"Going someplace?" Joe asked in his easy drawl. "Going someplace or just out taking a walk?"

The stallion still didn't move.

Joe Crispin moistened his lips. He made a mental vow never again to go to sleep without a rope in his hands. A horse such as this would bring a hundred dollars in Camarillo. Maybe more. And Joe was very good with his rope.

"Do you want to visit awhile?" Joe asked, still in his slow, quiet voice. "Is that it? Do you get lonesome back there in the hills?"

He got slowly to his knees. He stood up and was amazed, for the stallion still didn't race off. He had backed away a little but not far. Joe had the sudden feeling that if he could get his hands on his rope he could capture a prize much more valuable than the three bearskins he had taken. He edged casually toward where his horse was tied, still talking to the gray stallion. He reached for the rope looped over the saddle horn. The gray stallion had backed up a little more but still hadn't fled.

"Easy, boy. Easy," said Joe Crispin.

He shook out the loop in his rope. He moved forward. He started swinging the rope. He was tense, excited, but he managed to keep this out of his voice. The stallion backed off some more. Joe followed. One step, another, another, another. Ten yards, twenty, thirty. He could get no closer to the stallion. For every step he took the stallion took one.

"Stand, boy," Joe called. "Stand still. This is a nice rope. You'll not mind it at all."

He had to get closer. He couldn't risk a throw this far from the stallion. He glanced from side to side to spot a tree around which he could snub the rope after he had cast it. He kept moving forward, slowly. He kept talking. He had a feeling that for some strange reason the sound of his voice had kept the stallion from dashing away.

"Stand, boy," Joe Crispin begged. "Stand for just a minute."

The stallion backed off. Joe moved forward. The stallion backed away. Perspiration was cold on Joe's forehead. He was swinging his rope a little faster, now. He was measuring the cast. And then he heard it. A low, rumbling roar which sounded at first like

distant thunder but which grew in volume, and which seemed, suddenly, to be coming from just above him.

He turned his head for a quick glance up the cliff. The moonlight, striking on the red-streaked rock, showed it leaning forward, moving, sliding away from the hill above. A chunk the size of a bigger building than Joe had ever seen kicked slowly out from the cliff. The roaring noise was deafening in Joe's ears. The ground seemed to tremble.

A sharp, startled cry broke from Joe's throat. This cliff was coming down, coming down in a giant landslide. Joe dropped the rope he had been carrying. He raced forward and he was racing, now, for his life. Shale swept in his path and carried him with it for a short distance and left him sprawled flat on his face on its sharp rocks.

After a moment Joe got to his knees, then stood up. Behind him was a great cloud of dust which lifted slowly into the purple sky. His night camp was buried under a million tons of stone. He turned and looked ahead and in a clearing on the floor of the valley he caught a glimpse of the gray stallion. He had stopped and had turned his head back toward Joe and after a moment he tossed his head and gave a shrill, high neigh, and then disappeared, heading deeper into the mountains.

Joe Crispin had lost his horse in the landslide, his three bearskins, his rifle and camping equipment. He would have lost his life, he realized with a strange degree of wonder, if he hadn't wakened just when he did and if he hadn't seen the gray stallion and followed him. Other men, he knew, owed their lives to their horses, but he wondered if anyone else owed his life to a wild horse, a horse he had never even touched.

It was twenty miles from the face of Table Mountain to the Anderson ranch. Joe walked that twenty miles. He told the story of the landslide and his strange escape to Sam Anderson and his daughter, Myra. Sam was skeptical but Myra seemed to believe him and seemed deeply interested in what he said.

"It could have happened," she insisted. "There are wild horses back in the hills. You know there are, Dad."

"But they stay back in the hills," said Sam Anderson. "And when they see a man they hightail. They don't stand around."

"This one didn't stand, either," said Joe ruefully. "He backed off. I was almost close enough to throw my rope when I heard the landslide."

"It makes a good story, anyhow," Anderson chuckled.

He loaned Joe a horse and Joe rode on to Camarillo and the next night, in the Adobe saloon, he told his story again to more men who were skeptical. One man who heard it was Ben Mobridge, and Mobridge was interested.

"Wasn't Lodi, the stallion who used to lead the wild herd back in the Quemados, a gray?" he demanded.

"Sure he was," admitted Russ Holloway, the sheriff. "But Lodi hasn't been seen for years. He's probably dead."

"Couldn't this horse be his son?"

"Maybe. If there is such a horse."

"There is," said Joe Crispin stubbornly. "I'll admit he looked like a ghost standing there in the moonlight, but he was a real horse."

"The Gray Ghost," said Ben Mobridge. "You know, I'd like to have him. Get him for me, Joe, and I'll pay you a hundred dollars. I won't pay a

hundred for any gray horse, but bring me one as big as you say the Ghost was and the hundred is yours. I'll post it with Sanders, here in the Adobe saloon. I'll pay it to anyone who gets me the Gray Ghost."

This didn't go over so well with the men of Camarillo. Ben Mobridge wasn't very popular. He owned a ranch in the north end of the valley. He stood in the way of the dam proposed for the Camarillo River. For several years, now, damaging floods had swept the valley. The only way to avoid this was through a control dam which would hold back the river's high waters and the only practical place for a dam was up at the Narrows, on the Mobridge ranch.

There were other things which some men held against Ben Mobridge. He owned most of the stock in the Camarillo bank and, by virtue of this, dictated the bank's policy. Loans had grown hard to get and extension of time on overdue notes was a virtual impossibility. Several ranches in the upper valley had recently been added to the holdings of Ben Mobridge when their owners had to sell out to prevent a sheriff's foreclosure.

Mobridge was getting to be a big man, too big for the good of the community. He was one of the few men here who could afford to pay a hundred dollars for a horse, just on a whim, and this fact grated on the nerves of those who heard his offer.

"I'll get that horse for you," said Joe Crispin. "I could use a hundred dollars."

And so Joe Crispin left for the Quemado Mountains on a horse-hunting expedition, and though he sighted the Gray Ghost several times, or said he did, he failed to trap him.

The fall roundup in the Camarillo country was a community-wide project. Men started out in several groups in the wide, northeast end of the valley and worked south and west. This year, one of the outfits was in charge of Hugh DeLancy, a man of about fifty, a quiet, short, stocky, bald-headed man with plenty of cattle savvy. There were six others working with him, six and a chuck-wagon outfit.

DeLancy and his men combed the rugged foothills and gullies of the north Quemados and then moved down into the valley for the easier work which lay ahead.

Roundup time, in spite of the long and hard work involved, was always a favorite time with cowhands. It was good to work with other men for a change. It was good to put in a hard day in the saddle and then to gather around the chuck-wagon fire at night for a hearty meal and a bull session.

DeLancy, a hard-headed, practical man, took no part in this talk, but he still enjoyed it. He sat with the others in the established democracy of the range. He listened. He chuckled at stories he had heard at other fires, many times over. He grinned and nodded his bald head at new stories or new variations to old stories. He smoked his pipe and now and then spat over his shoulder into the close-crowding

shadows, and one night, turning his head this way, he stiffened. There, on the fringe of light cast by the fire, was a giant gray stallion.

DeLancy couldn't believe his eyes. He rubbed them, then looked again. The stallion was still there, almost close enough to touch. DeLancy got to his knees. He stood up.

Everyone at the campfire had seen the horse by this time. There was no talk. Men sat rigid.

"The Gray Ghost," whispered someone under his breath. "Joe Crispin was right. He didn't dream what he told us."

DeLancy moved away from the fire. He got his rope, shook out the loop, moved close to the stallion and cast it. The noose settled over the stallion's neck and DeLancy quickly snubbed the end of the rope around the tongue of the chuck wagon. But this wasn't necessary. The gray stallion seemed to quiver at the feel of the rope, but didn't bolt away.

All the men were now standing. DeLancy moved up the rope. He put out his hand. He touched the Gray Ghost on the nose, then moved nearer and touched the stallion's neck. He said later that he felt as excited as a boy at that moment, and possibly he did. Here was as fine a horse as he had ever seen. And it was his.

"He just walked up here and asked for it," someone muttered. "I never heard of anything like it before. When we tell this story, who in time will believe us? He's a wild horse. He never felt a saddle. Look at him."

"Get another rope on him, Eddie," DeLancy ordered. "And bring my saddle and bridle. I'm going to ride him."

There were men in that crew who tried to argue DeLancy out of anything so foolish, but DeLancy wouldn't listen to them. He felt—and again he explained this later—he felt an irresistible urge to ride this horse. Nothing could have stopped him. As he always told the story, if his saddle and bridle hadn't been brought, he would have ridden the Gray Ghost bareback.

But someone brought his bridle and saddle, and DeLancy slipped the bridle over the stallion's head. There was no struggle. The Gray Ghost took the bit with only a toss of his head. He didn't rear or kick when the saddle was put on his back or when the cinch was tightened.

Hugh DeLancy was a good rider. He climbed into the saddle and lifted the reins and he felt a sudden confidence. He ordered the rope taken from the stallion's neck. He grinned at the men who were gaping at him.

"Come on, Ghost," he said. "Let's run a ways."

The Gray Ghost swung around and started off across country at a powerful gallop. He didn't buck. Not once. He just ran, and DeLancy knew that he had never before in his life traveled so fast.

After a time, DeLancy pulled on the reins, and he was a powerful man, but the Gray Ghost didn't stop. DeLancy tried to turn him but the stallion wouldn't turn. The bit must have hurt him cruelly. It turned his head, but he didn't swerve or slow down, and with a sudden, forward lunge of his neck he tore the reins from DeLancy's grasp.

There was nothing to do after that but hold on and at first DeLancy was frightened. He thought the Gray Ghost might head for the hills, and deep in them, pitch him off and leave him, perhaps with a broken leg. The Ghost,

however, wasn't heading for the hills. He was heading toward Camarillo in a line which would pass close to DeLancy's ranch, or even right by it.

Fifteen miles it was from the chuck-wagon camp to the DeLancy ranch and DeLancy swears that not once during that fifteen miles did the Gray Ghost slow down or change direction. And DeLancy has sworn on a Bible that when they reached the ranch, the Gray Ghost jumped the fence into the yard and stopped of his own free will. That may be true, and probably as DeLancy says, he sat there for a moment on the Gray Ghost's back, winded and half frightened, and more puzzled than he had ever been in his life.

And then he smelled the smoke. It was pouring from the open, upstairs windows, great columns of it, black and ugly, and through the blackness of the smoke were dark red tongues of flame.

DeLancy's wife, his daughter, and two young sons were in that house, and DeLancy didn't waste another minute. He swung to the ground, raced for the house, splintered the door with his shoulder, and headed for the stairs. He carried out his wife, who had been overcome by the smoke. He saved his three children. By then, there was no chance to save the house.

Surrounded by his family, he watched it burn down. Suddenly he remembered the Gray Ghost. He looked from side to side. The light of the fire brightened a wide area, but nowhere that he looked did he see the horse which had brought him here. The Gray Ghost was gone.

Of course there were men who said that DeLancy guided the horse to his home, or that he even did it unconsciously, drawn there by the danger which threatened his family and which he felt because of his closeness to them. This is possible. Many things happen in this world which men cannot explain logically. Joe Crispin understood, or said he did. And Ben Mobridge had something to say, which was quite typical of Ben Mobridge.

"Why didn't you tie up the stallion before you rushed into the house?" he wanted to know. "I would have paid a hundred and fifty for him if he is as good as you say he is."

"But I wouldn't have sold him to you at any price," DeLancy snapped.

Months passed before the Gray Ghost was seen again. Men hunted him back in the Quemados, where the wild horses ran, hunted him without success. Then one day—

Carlos Bentz was a tall, slender young man who worked for Sam Anderson. He was a thoughtful chap, steady. He saved his money. He looked ahead. But the money which can be saved from a cowhand's wages isn't much. It takes a long time for it to count up.

Carlos was in love, hopelessly, desperately in love with Myra Anderson, the daughter of the man for whom he worked. What made matters worse was that Myra loved him. And they could do nothing about it. The money

Carlos had been able to save was mighty small in comparison to the cost of land and a feeder herd. In a dozen years, maybe, or perhaps in five years, if he was lucky, he could manage a small place of his own. What man really in love, however, wants to wait five years?

Each day that he stayed on at the Anderson place and saw Myra and realized the hopelessness of his position grew to be a day of torture, and at last he could stand it no longer. He saddled his horse one night and rode off, knowing he would never return and feeling a bitterness which scorched his soul. He had his moments of temptation, too. Moments when he contemplated the holdup of a stage, or a bank, or even a venture in the field of rustling. This of course, passed, and dawn saw him on the road to the pass, out of the valley.

It was on this road that he roped the Gray Ghost. As Carlos told it later, he rounded a turn climbing into the hills, and there, just ahead of him, stood the stallion. He roped him with no trouble at all. He roped him and the stallion stood and made no effort to get away. DeLancy's saddle and bridle were gone.

Carlos Bentz sat on his horse and stared at the Gray Ghost. The stallion was all he had been said to be. All and more. And as Carlos stared at him, the bitterness which had gripped him slipped away. His spirits soared He straightened a little in the saddle. Here was a hundred and fifty dollars, at least, if he could lead the horse to Camarillo. Here was more. Here was something he could bargain with. He could use the Gray Ghost as a club to force Mobridge to approve a loan. It would work. He knew it.

"Come on, Ghost," said Carlos Bentz, and his voice shook a little. "Let's ride to town."

He didn't go straight to town with the Gray Ghost. It wasn't much out of his way to go by the Anderson ranch and it is understandable that he should have wanted Myra to see the stallion and to know what the Gray Ghost would mean to them both.

He headed straight across country to the Anderson ranch. He met no one and when he reached the ranch in the late afternoon, Anderson and the men who worked for him were away. Neither Myra nor her mother saw him coming, or at least neither one came to the door. Carlos tied the Gray Ghost securely to the top rail of the corral fence, then hurried to the house.

In the kitchen he found Myra. Her eyes were red from crying, for he had left a note for her and she had read it. He caught her up in his arms and he was so glad to be back that at first he forgot to mention the Gray Ghost. When he did, Myra pushed him away.

"You came back just because of that?" she asked. "Just because you caught the Gray Ghost?"

"But don't you see what it will mean to us?" said Carlos. "Now we have a chance. I can get a loan. What we want will be possible."

"If people want something hard enough, it's always possible," said Myra. "If people are strong enough they don't have to fear anything. We're strong, Carlos. We don't need the Gray Ghost."

Carlos Bentz could feel the truth of what Myra was saying. She was right, of course. He had been wrong.

"There's one thing, anyhow," he said slowly. "The Gray Ghost brought me back to you. We'll keep him, Myra.

We'll keep him forever. We'll never sell him. Come outside with me. I want you to see him."

They went outside. The Gray Ghost was gone and so was the top rail of the corral fence to which he had been tied. But he had been there, without any question. Mrs. Anderson verified that. From the bedroom window she had seen him, and had seen him break free.

"He pulled that top rail off as easily as though it had been a toothpick," she later declared. "He could have taken the whole fence if it had stuck together."

Why did the Gray Ghost let himself be taken so easily? Why, if he came so easily to the Anderson ranch, did he then break free? Men had no answer to that. Most men. But Myra understood. The Gray Ghost had brought Carlos back to her. And Carlos understood. The Gray Ghost had taught him a lesson, had taught him not to fear. Joe Crispin understood, too, and the DeLancys, and perhaps a few others. And, some time later, Russ Holloway understood. Russ Holloway, who was the sheriff in Camarillo.

There is a small frame house at the extreme north edge of Camarillo, a white house with brown trimming, a garden in the side yard and a brown barn behind. It was to this house that Russ Holloway had moved with his wife a dozen years before when he gave up ranching and took over the sheriff's job. He now lived in it alone, for his wife was dead, and he didn't have to, but he spent a part of every nice day in the garden which his wife had started and which some people thought wasn't a very practical project. The garden was mainly a flower garden.

It amused some of the hard characters who drifted through Camarillo that the sheriff was a man who raised flowers. These same men, however, weren't amused at Russ Holloway if they didn't behave. The same hand that could tenderly transplant some rare flower could also handle a gun or clench into a jolting fist. Russ Holloway wasn't a man to fool around with.

He usually spent his evenings in town and was quite late in getting home and one night when he turned up the stone-bordered walk to his porch, he had a visitor waiting at the side of his house. Not the usual sort of visitor, or one to be afraid of, but a visitor who startled him, just the same. There, in the shadows of his garden, stood a horse.

It was Holloway's first thought that some neighbor's horse had wandered away and had come into his garden by chance and he was annoyed. He didn't want his flowers trampled. He angled toward the garden. He shouted at the horse:

"Get out of there! Beat it! Go back to where you came from!"

The horse backed off but didn't trot away. Holloway moved closer. He stared at the horse and felt a sudden stab of excitement. It was the Gray Ghost. He knew it, even though it was too

dark to see the color clearly. He knew it by the size of the horse, by the proud lift of the head, and by the fearless way it faced him. He had heard the Gray Ghost described many times by those who had seen him. Now he said a strange thing.

"What is it, Ghost? What do you want?"

The horse didn't move, didn't wheel and run away, and suddenly Russ Holloway was frightened. There was no cliff here to fall on him, no one in his house should it be on fire, no one from whom he was escaping. There was no basis for his fear save in his own imagination, but it was there.

"What is it, Ghost?" he asked again.

The words sounded foolish. Russ Holloway bit his lips, shook his head. He didn't believe in the Gray Ghost. He didn't believe the stories he had heard. He was a level-headed, practical man and he had a practical explanation for what had happened to those who had seen this stallion. Yet here he was, acting like a kid. He moved forward again, and again the Gray Ghost backed away.

"All right," said Russ Holloway grimly. "Here we go. Let's see your magic. Let's see what happens."

He crossed the garden. The Gray Ghost trotted behind the barn. Holloway followed. The stallion jumped the back fence and moved toward town, keeping behind the buildings fronting the main street. Holloway still followed, but suddenly he stopped.

He had come to a point just beyond the back corner of the feed store. There was a vacant lot here, and then the bank, and the side door of the bank had opened and three men had just come out.

Holloway forgot all about the Gray Ghost. He stared toward the three men. It was late, past midnight. The bank had long been closed. No one had worked there tonight. There was certainly no honest reason why three men should be leaving now by the side door.

They had turned toward the rear of the lot and they were hugging the side of the building as though to stay in its deeper shadow. Each was carrying something. Holloway couldn't see what this was, but he could guess. He reached for his guns.

"Hey there!" he called, and his voice was sharp, commanding. "Not so fast! Where are you going?"

The men stiffened. They turned toward him. Starlight glistened on the barrel of a gun. A shot screamed past Holloway's ear.

Russ Holloway held a gun in each hand. He opened up with one, then the other. "All right," he shouted; "you asked for it!"

One of the men near the bank stumbled to his knees, then fell forward on his face. Another twisted half around, sagged against the adobe wall, hung there for a moment, and then slid to the ground. The third man dropped what he was carrying and fled. He made it as far as the back corner of the building. There he seemed to trip. There he fell.

A crowd gathered almost immediately. Those who had been in the Adobe saloon were across the street almost before the echoes of the firing had died out. More joined them later from their homes. Someone entered the bank and freed Arthur Carson, the bank's president, who had been forced to open his safe to the robbers. Others carried back inside the three heavy canvas sacks which held almost every cent of the bank's cash assets. A doctor was

summoned to care for two of the wounded robbers. The third didn't need a doctor's attention. He was dead.

It was ten minutes after this crowd had gathered that Russ Holloway pushed his way into the bank.

"Hey, where have you been?" someone asked. "I saw you out back of the bank just after you gunned down the robbers. Did one get away?"

Holloway shook his head. He looked around at this crowd, knowing he couldn't tell them he had been out looking for the Gray Ghost, wondering if the Gray Ghost was still around. They wouldn't believe him. If he said the Gray Ghost had led him here it would sound fantastic.

"I don't know how you happened by," said Arthur Carson, "but if you hadn't recovered this money, the bank would have closed. It would have hit everyone in Camarillo."

"Get a better safe," said Russ Holloway gruffly. "There's one put out by Sergeant and Yale that's tied up with a clock and can't be opened until a certain time, the time you set."

He turned away, then, and stepped outside. He walked home and on the way, doubts assailed him. He moved out to the garden and got down on his hands and knees and struck a match. He stared at the ground. The prints were there, the hoofprints of the Ghost.

The Camarillo River went over its banks again that spring, covering thousands of acres of farm lands and alfalfa with silt and rocks. It was one of the most damaging floods the country had known. There was talk again, after this flood, of a dam in the Narrows with a control channel, but Ben Mobridge would not change his mind.

"Tell people to grow their crops on higher land," he said gruffly. "You'll never make a lake of that land back of the Narrows. I need it for summer grazing."

Mobridge still held majority control of the bank's stock and the bank would have to finance the dam, so no one could see a way out. In spite of this, however, a meeting was held one night in Camarillo to discuss the matter. It accomplished nothing. Angry and defiant, Ben Mobridge left the meeting early. It was about fifteen minutes later that Joe Crispin burst into the town hall where the meeting had been held.

"Ben has caught him," Joe Crispin shouted. "He's caught the Gray Ghost."

Men had still been talking about the dam but at this word from Joe Crispin they hurried outside.

"Ben went up to the livery stable after his horse," Joe Crispin explained. "The Gray Ghost was at the corral fence. He was after that bay filly. Ben got a rope on him before the Ghost knew what had happened."

Everyone trooped up to the livery stable. What Crispin had said was true. Ben Mobridge had the Gray Ghost. He now had three ropes on him and, with men holding the ropes and another helping him, Mobridge was saddling the stallion. He was excited.

"I've got him," he shouted to the

crowd which had gathered. "I've got him and he'll never get away."

"That's probably true," someone muttered. "Nothing Mobridge ever gets his hands on gets away."

They had the stallion saddled and bridled. It had really been no trouble. The Ghost was making no effort to escape. He stood there, his head held high, seemingly indifferent to what was happening.

"Don't ride him," called the sheriff.

"Are you crazy?" asked Mobridge. "Of course I'll ride him."

Russ Holloway said nothing more. He scowled. He wondered why he had advised Mobridge not to ride the Ghost. After all, the Ghost was just another horse.

Ben Mobridge swung into the saddle. The ropes with which the stallion had been held were removed. Men backed away, expecting the Ghost to buck, expecting to see a real contest. They were disappointed. As though this were the most usual thing in the world, the Gray Ghost wheeled under the command of the rein, trotted to the main street, and turned down it.

"Wait for me," Ben Mobridge shouted to the crowd. "I'm going to see what he can do. I'll be back."

But Ben Mobridge was wrong. He never came back from that ride. Where he went or what happened to him, men never knew. The trail of the Gray Ghost could be followed. It led in an erratic way across country, bearing ever toward the Quemado Mountains. Deep in those mountains, it was lost. And deep in those mountains, somewhere, is the secret of what happened to Ben Mobridge.

The next year, a dam and flood-control channel were built in the narrows with the approval of Ben's widow. It is still there, though now quite modernized. You may have seen it. They call it the Gray Ghost dam.

And the Gray Ghost? Ask the man who told the story. Ask any of the old-timers who listened and nodded as it was told. The Gray Ghost, they insist, is still up there in the Quemados, the leader of a herd of wild horses. Or maybe it's the son or grandson of the Gray Ghost who leads them now. He's a giant in size. He's swift and cunning. You can still trap wild horses in the Quemados, but not the gray or the band which follows him.

Ask another question. Ask why the Gray Ghost ever came down to the valley and someone will remind you that he twice saved the community, once when the bank was threatened and again when a stubborn man stood in the way of a needed improvement. Then someone may refer you to Senator Joseph P. Crispin whose work in Congress has meant so much to the West. Or he may mention Dolores Bentz, daughter of Carlos and Myra Bentz, whose paintings hang in the finest art galleries in the land; or Samuel DeLancy, second son of Hugh DeLancy, whose music has enthralled millions.

After this, as sure as anything, one of the old-timers will tell you that God sometimes moves in mysterious ways.

Maybe that's the answer.

This reticent gun artist who wore his hair long and his guns butt-forward was poison to badmen—and he died with his boots off, a peaceful merchant.

Commodore of the Cross Draw

By HAROLD PREECE

THEY said everybody but the barbers would vote for him when he announced for Sheriff of Apache County. You could hardly expect men who earned their bread by their scissors to appreciate a candidate who wore his hair in long, blond locks reaching down to his waist.

Commodore Perry Owens didn't chuckle at the wheezy joke after the manner of Arizona men. He was as chary with his humor as he was with his money. Few ever felt close to him because, above all, he was a solitary, sparing of intimacies. He was of the West. But he could as easily have been of any other section where survival depends on guts without brag or cunning without conceit.

More windy nonsense has been written about him than he ever would have tolerated in his lifetime. One writer had him as a leading figure in a celebrated range war, at a period when the ranch starting the rumpus was yet to be staked out. Another claimed that his odd hair-do was in deliberate imitation of Samson. More likely, it was simply

because Owens, the uncompromising individualist, preferred long hair to short.

Ours is a day when every saddle tramp who got his name written down somewhere is in process of becoming a demi-god. A poisonous little sidewinder like Doc Holliday turns up as a champion of law and order through the conjure tricks of pen pushers who wouldn't know a bandit from a deputy. Billy the Kid reincarnates as Robin Hood when he was simply the forerunner of every little sidewalk gangster whom some well-meaning folk try to reform through ice cream and volley ball.

But a few men of a better breed resist the corruption of legend to remain authentically themselves. What they did in life dwarfs what was said about them in death. One of these, standing clear above the gathering haze of fable, is the Apache County officer remembered by old-timers as one of the West's last great sheriffs.

He was born July 29, 1852, in East Tennessee. His father, who had never seen a ship nor a body of water bigger than Clinch River, christened him "Commodore Perry" after the hero of Lake Erie.

Tennessee has habitually furnished the West with good men from Sam Houston to Davy Crockett and Jack Hays. In fact, there was no better apprenticeship for life on the frontier than growing up in a state where boys graduated from diapers and slingshots into saddles and rifles.

Owens's cousins in Tennessee swear that he could ride the wildest horse in the hills when he was seven and shoot out the eye of a squirrel at a hundred yards when he was nine. Family pride is apt to stretch truth, but Commodore, as they called him, broke horses before he broke his own feet into shoes. He grew up, tall and taciturn, winning handily any local shoot in which he cared to aim a gun. The stripling was rated as being uncommonly handsome, with his cherubic face and his penetrating blue eyes that saw everything.

Even then, men had learned not to force familiarity on him. He took little interest in gathering with his kind. Everybody else in the hills turned out for the neighborhood candy pulls and log rollings where lad paired off with lass to crowd the ridges with more cabins and more broods of scrapping little Scotch-Irishmen.

The Saturday-night square dances in his community attracted people from twenty miles around. But in a section where every other man is a caller or a fiddler, Commodore Owens never bothered about learning to pat a foot.

His need of work took him West during the chaotic Reconstruction period following the Civil War. Alone of the beaten Confederate states, Texas was pulling out of that depression—pulling out through her booming cattle trade with its great market route of the Chisholm Trail.

Southerners were in demand as cowpunchers because handling livestock came naturally to them, like riding and shooting. The tight-mouthed Tennessean had no difficulty in finding a job, and rode herd in the Lone Star State for eleven of the roughest years of the longhorn age.

It was during those years that he began letting his hair grow long. He found himself only an average shot by Texas standards, so he whiled away the endless hours of riding by practising with his Winchester and six-shooter.

The result was that the mortality rate began jumping among the outlaw gangs prowling his assigned stretch of range. Texas posses had only to follow Commodore Owens's hoof tracks to pick up steer rustlers and horse thieves damaged beyond repair. But he wasn't helpful when it came to providing details.

If lawmen quizzed him about his obvious battles, he quickly switched the subject. Once they tried to make him talk by offering him the reward due him for slaying a particularly notorious desperado.

Owens shook his head. "I like money as well as the next man," he answered. "I'll take the five-dollar bounty on a wolf's scalp or the two and a half on a coyote's. But I won't take a bounty on a man's corpse."

With no word of his adding to it, his reputation began spreading throughout the West. The Texas Rangers gossiped about his hair and his trigger work over their campfires. Several times, he declined commissions to ride with that great force of frontier fighters.

"When Commodore Owens aims at a man, he's already a dead man," the punchers bragged at the Texan hangouts in Hays City and Dodge. Stories circulated about his having wiped out one gang of six with five shells, the last bullet having plugged two outlaws riding the same horse after Commodore had shot one pony from under its mount.

It was said that Ben Thompson, quasi-outlaw and the most noted of Texas gun fighters, traveled miles out of his way to avoid meeting the long-haired one. When Butch Cassidy found some of his Wild Bunch missing and unaccounted for, the tale went up and down every range that Commodore Owens had blasted and buried them.

A New Mexico rancher, beset by Navajo rustlers, listened to the shotgun saga of the Tennessean told him by a wandering cowhand. The rancher took the first train for Texas, swearing that he wouldn't return without Owens. He had hardly crossed the state line when a conductor told him of Commodore's having bagged a couple of ambitious buckies who had meant to rob the train.

"Come and be my foreman; name your own wage," the ranchman blurted as soon as he shook hands with the tall, silent puncher.

Owens deliberated a full week before he gave his answer. These rocks and arroyos of Texas had become a part of him. He knew every pebble and every blade of grass on his line. Silent and undemonstrative as he was, he liked the bluff Texan for whom he rode, and hated to leave him.

Above all, he knew that his love of solitude would be tempered by the necessity of bossing men if he became a foreman. He would need to be with them constantly, overseeing their work. He would have to settle their squabbles before they reached gun stage, and haul them out of calabooses when they got playful and wrecked saloons.

Still, a man had to weigh everything in every scale. He was now thirty years old and, after eleven years on the range, still drawing thirty a month. True, he could have had a sizable bankroll and, maybe, his own spread by claiming the rewards on outlaws he had finished. But he didn't like the feel of blood money because he knew of innocent men who had been killed by venal sheriffs greedy for man-boun-

ty. As it was, he still sent half of his punching wages back to his kin in Tennessee and deposited the other half, minus incidental expenses, in a safe bank.

Yet his orderly mind hated those who wilfully stole and destroyed the property of others. This New Mexico rancher needed help to protect property honestly gotten. When Owens finally accepted the job, he named a wage steep for that day and place. Still, it was less than his new employer had expected to pay.

Owens had been in New Mexico only a few days, that year of 1882, when he sighted his first band of Navajo rustlers. Three braves had cut out a bunch of fat steers and were driving them toward the reservation. Keeping out of sight behind sandhills, gauging his movements by the distant lowing of the steers, Owens trailed them toward the Navajo Springs, where he figured the thieves would stop to water the cattle.

His judgment was correct. The braves thought he was another fair-skinned half-breed roaming New Mexico Territory when they saw his hair, long like theirs, and his face, blond like a white man's.

"Ho, brother," one called when Owens galloped up to the springs. "Ride with us to the reservation and feast on the white man's beef." The Indian motioned with his hand toward the steers greedily sucking up the water.

A second Navajo proferred Owens a lighted pipe—the traditional gesture of hospitality toward a kinsman. Owens's hand reached forward as if to take the pipe, then quickly touched his loaded Winchester.

The first bullet from the high-powered repeater rifle shattered first the pipe bowl, then the Navajo's skull. His second bullet tore a jagged hole down the middle of a second brave who dropped into a spring, stampeding the steers. The third Navajo sprang to his pony and streaked in a long, swift lope toward the reservation.

Owens had hoped to run him down and make him reveal the identity of every other Navajo rustling New Mexico cattle. But the Indian had the advantage of a better mount, and the initial few feet between them widened to ten, fifty, then a hundred yards.

With a sigh, Owens again raised his Winchester and fired. It was a long shot at a target moving like the wind. But it caught the surviving brave at the base of his neck, and nearly decapitated him.

Three thieves were dead from his first battle in this big, sprawling territory—just as three had died in his first fight with white rustler, years ago in Texas. Wise to the ways of rustlers, white and red, Owens knew that the continuing warfare against them must be waged on a higher level than casual skirmishes. Those who had got their property honestly must take the offensive to keep it. If Commodore Owens was a great fighter, he was also a supreme strategist who realized that the best defense against outlaws was getting the drop instead of bucking it.

He got himself a deputy sheriff's commission so that finicky Federal courts could not call him to account for slaying Uncle Sam's prodigal wards. He had no quarrel with the majority of the tribe, who were simple, peaceful herdsmen. But he moved against that minority of Navajos who turned outlaw, with the fury of an attacking army.

On his lonesome, or sometimes with

squads of cowboys, he ferreted out their secret corrals in dense canyons and deep arroyos. He brought back thousands of stolen cattle from Navajo hideaways. He and his partners left entire bands of red-skinned rustlers lying dead for tribesmen to locate and bury. Not since Custer and Crook had bad Indians faced a man who meant business so surely and ruthlessly. And the number of cattle increased on New Mexico's ranges in direct proportion to the decrease in steer-snatching freebooters. Finally, not one Navajo dared look crossways at a range steer.

Owens could have stopped then and rested on his laurels. Had he never fired another shot, his name would have gone down in history with Pat Garrett's, Bill Tilghman's, and those of the other illustrious man-tamers of the West.

But after he had been five years in New Mexico, he was visited by another rancher who begged him to come to still another territory where help was needed. The man was Sam Brown, leader of the law-and-order element in the worst outlaw-cursed county in Arizona.

"The Clanton brothers, who got run out of Tombstone, are helping themselves to our herds," Sam Brown told him. "We need a man with guts to put on our ticket for Sheriff of Apache County."

The Clanton boys, some of whom had once crossed triggers with Marshal Wyatt Earp, were Arizona's prize rustlers. Since Earp's departure from the Territory, they bragged that no officer dared serve them with a warrant. Their bluster rubbed Owens the wrong way, and he determined to call their hand. So he threw up his foreman's job and went to Arizona, a candidate for sheriff of a county where he had never been a citizen.

When he got there, he was too reserved and independent to solicit a single vote. He let Sam Brown and the other leaders of the law-and-order party do all his campaigning. Meanwhile, he was perfecting a shooting style of which he was to become the outstanding master.

That was the cross draw. All men talked about it, but few had dared use it in the spitting-lead sprees of the Old West. Basically, it called for the gun butt to point toward the front rather than the rear in the holster worn on the left hip rather than the right. The new style meant a possibly fatal fraction of a second in drawing for a one-gun man. He would have to swing his right or shooting hand from the right to the left to grab his gun instead of having it conveniently at finger reach.

But it offered certain advantages for a two-gun wearer if he mastered it. The position of the butts meant that he could draw faster and shoot diagonally with hands crossed instead of at a straight parallel.

Apache County voters shook their heads and swore they were being asked to support a candidate for the graveyard instead of a candidate for sheriff. But Sam Brown's influence gave Owens a thumping majority at the polls. Owens took the oath of office. Then he set about the business of impaneling a grand jury that would give him a legal basis for performing certain pressing duties.

Previous Apache County grand juries had been tired, dispirited affairs that either no-billed outlaws or failed to indict them until they had safely crossed the county line. But now veniremen took heart as a courageous

sheriff promised that every man they cited would be rounded up for trial. At the end of the first session held during Owens's term, indictments were brought against sixteen desperados, including Phin Clanton, the rustler ringleader, Ike Clanton, a brother, and two of their henchmen.

Owens then summoned a posse of the most fearless men in St. Johns, the county seat, and set out for the Clanton camp on Blue River. They found all the gang present at the rendezvous except Phin, the leader.

"I've got warrants for every one of you," Owens addressed Ike Clanton when the posse rode up. "Coming along peacefully?"

Ike Clanton spat derisively on the ground. Then all four of the outlaws began answering with lead.

Owens dismounted with his possemen and charged through the barrage. His guns were crossed and aiming at outlaws in diagonal directions when he fired. Ike Clanton fell clutching his heart; the other gun finished a henchman. The remaining two desperadoes fell before the fire of the posse.

It had taken exactly five minutes to finish all but one member of the Territory's bloodiest outlaw combine. That one was Phin Clanton.

"Surround the camp," Owens commanded his deputies. "We'll just wait and break the news to him."

It was sundown when Phin Clanton rode in to look down startled at the bodies of his brother and his *compadres*. He spurred his horse with the intention of riding away. Then he was surrounded by armed riders breaking out of ambush.

"Drop your gun, Phin," Owens said quietly. When the outlaw's Colt tumbled to the ground, the long-maned sheriff calmly drew a paper out of his pocket.

"Before I forget it, Phin," he remarked dryly, "I reckon the time has come to serve a warrant on you."

Phin Clanton drew ten years for cattle rustling and the sheriff took him, a sobered, chastened prisoner, to the Territorial penitentiary in Yuma. Afterward, Owens rounded up all other men under indictment. One by one, they joined Phin on the rockpile.

Without bluff or brag, Owens was determined to rid Apache County of its roving thieves and killers. He was equally intent on keeping his jurisdiction free of the criminal backwash from other counties.

On a calm autumn day, he was in the little town of Holbrook summoning men for jury service. As he entered the village, he felt the tenseness in the air. For Holbrook was one of the main centers of the raging Tonto Basin range war with punchers from the Hashknife outfit of that section riding forth to slaughter sheepmen at Pleasant Valley in near-by Yavapai County.

Sam Brown came to the livery stable where Owens boarded his horse and told the sheriff that Andy Blevans, a notorious Hashknife gunman, was in town visiting his stepmother. Carefully, Owens reached in his saddlebag and pulled out a murder warrant for Blevans. As carefully, he cleaned and oiled his gun.

The news spread that the sheriff was planning to serve a warrant on the swaggering killer. Scores of people lined the street silently watching Owens as he walked calmly toward the home of Ma Blevans.

When he reached the house, he opened the gate and strolled up the

walk to the porch. He knocked on the door, but not a sound was heard inside.

"Andy Blevans—open up!" the sheriff called, rapping sharply.

Again silence. Raising his Winchester, Owens forced the door open with the barrel. Then he saw himself looking into the mouth of a gun with Andy Blevans at the other end. A side door in the house opened a crack. The sheriff saw a second gun manned by Andy's brother, John.

He realized that they meant to mow him down in a crossfire. But his voice was unwavering when he stood his Winchester against the door frame and addressed the wanted man:

"I've got a warrant for you, Andy. You're riding into St. Johns with me."

"The hell I am!" Andy Blevans roared back. The hands of both brothers flashed to their triggers. That minute, Commodore Owens proved to the most skeptical that the cross draw is the only sure defense against a cross-fire.

His arms a big letter X, his two hand guns pointing diagonally, Owens beat them to the draw in the hundredth of a second. John Blevans staggered back, winged in the shoulder. Andy Blevans dropped dead at the sheriff's feet.

Two more guns and two more faces loomed before him. His arms and guns still crossed, he ducked and fired again. Mose Roberts, a brother-in-law, and Sam Blevans, another of his brothers, dropped dead.

The battle had lasted exactly sixty seconds; three men lay dead and another seriously wounded. Slowly, Owens drew a silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the trailing smoke from the barrels. Then, his face grim and set, he walked back toward the main street.

Men respectfully drew back from the sidewalk to let him pass. Then they began whispering about what has gone down in history as the outstanding exhibition of cross-draw shooting in the West.

Owens heard none of the murmured comments. His cold blue eyes were searching the street for Hashknife gunmen. A dozen times, he stopped short before some figure measuring him warily for a coffin.

"This county's not being used as a base for crime in another county," he would say. "Don't let me see you in Holbrook after three hours."

A hot, sudden wind was blowing his long hair around his broad shoulders when he spoke to the last man. "You don't get three hours," he said, "because you're the man who hired 'em to do all the killing in Yavapai County. You get three minutes."

The man glanced at his gun and then at his saddle. Saddle won. In two minutes flat, the Hashknife's boss killer was a speck of receding dust.

Owens, himself, could not end the Tonto Basin war, being fought to a shot gun finish between the Grahams, who raised steers, and the Tewksburys, who ran sheep. All the actual fighting was outside his jurisdiction. But oldtimers who went through that bitter fracas of grass and wool and blood swear that the aloof, courageous Apache County sheriff shortened it by wiping out the Hashknife operations base in Holbrook.

It's debatable, like the issues in the Graham-Tewksbury vendetta itself. No one officer could have completely demobilized the Hashknife crowd—the bloodiest aggregation of sombreroed storm troopers that the West had seen since the trigger-larking buckies of Billy the

Kid. But Holbrook and the other Apache County settlements were making long strides toward civilization when Commodore Perry Owens wound up his three years as sheriff in 1890.

He could have been re-elected without a shadow of opposition. But he chose instead to become a special agent for the Santa Fe railroad. Later he served as an express messenger for Wells-Fargo; after that, as a United States marshal.

In 1900, at the age of forty-eight, he laid down his gun forever and opened a general store in the Arizona town of Seligman. True to his nature, he refused to go in for lavish display or advertising. But customers flocked to his place when they found that he gave them short weight on only one commodity.

That was conversation.

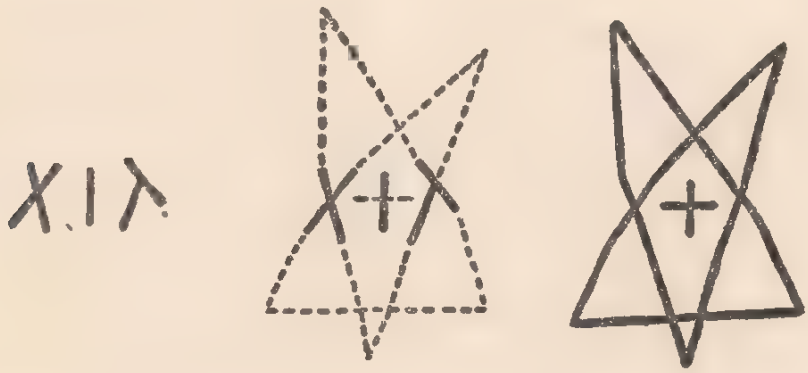
One of his patrons was a serious-faced, youngish woman by the name of Elizabeth Barrett. He had waited long to choose a mate because he was deliberate about everything except shooting. He watched the judicious, careful way in which she managed her shopping and managed herself. At the age of fifty, he surprised Arizona by getting married.

Owens died in Seligman at the age of sixty-six on May 10, 1919, and was buried at Flagstaff with honors befitting a pioneer. With his passing, only one of the really famous peace officers of Old Arizona was left alive. That was Wyatt Earp, who went out, like Owens, with "boots off" around 1928.

To the day of his death, Commodore Perry Owens's hair was unshorn and his face unseamed. He looked as ever-youthful as the West. His lifetime spanned the evolution into modern times of three great Western states—Texas, where he started; New Mexico, where he tarried; Arizona, where he finished. And his name is a cornerstone of each.

Solution for "Rustlers' Rebus" puzzle on page 112

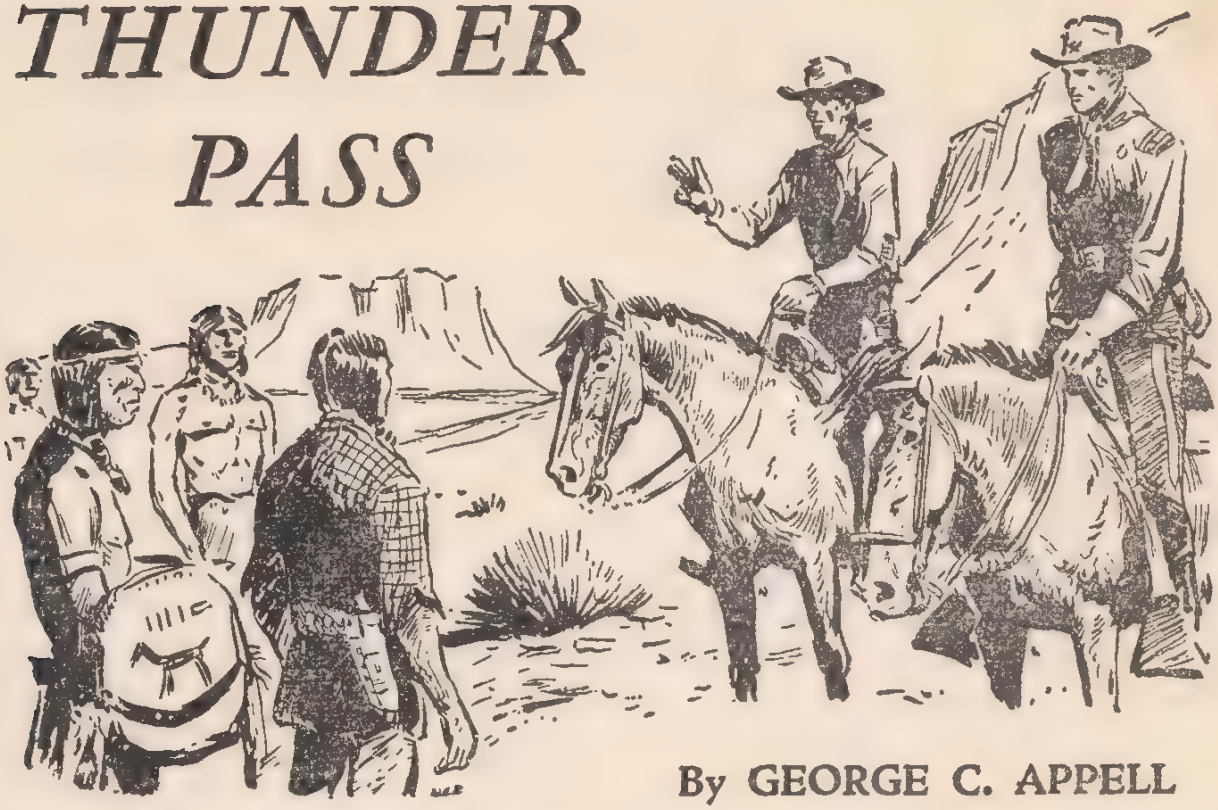
Here's how it was done:



—and if this looks too crude to you, remember that a cow's hip isn't a drafting board.

A past master of the finer points of Indian-fighting and love-making, Ross Ringler teaches a green young shavetail something about both.

THUNDER PASS



By GEORGE C. APPELL

ROSS RINGLER came into the sutler's office cat-quiet and stood a moment in the open door, regarding with sharp disgust the man's mountainous shoulders, his fat neck with its sweaty rolls, his butter-muscled arms and belly. The sutler was at the corner desk, writing up entries of credit, and that, too, annoyed Ross Ringler, for he had no use for paper work, accounts, or ledgers. Silently, easily, without waste of motion, he dragged his hand gun from its holster, leveled the sight blade on a neck crease, took a short breath, and pulled the trigger.

The hammer-click brought the sutler around on his broad haunches, hands out, eyes wide. Then he lowered his hands to his knees and nodded shortly. "Afternoon."

Ringler snapped the cylinder out of the frame, leaned against a table, and proceeded to load the hand gun. "Just drew ammunition. Thought I'd try the firing pin."

The sutler sniffed. "That's a dangerous habit, Ringler."

"Any habit's dangerous." Ringler grinned, of a sudden, flipped the loaded cylinder back into the frame, and holstered the gun. "Thought I'd scare some weight off you."

Distaste tinged the fat man's tone. "Some people never grow up."

"In many ways, they don't." Ringler folded crane-lean arms and crossed one boot over the other. "Sometimes, it helps."

The sutler's eyes were narrow as he tried for the twentieth time to evaluate

this narrow-hipped man with the sloping shoulders and sunken jaws and cropped, red hair. A man who had seen many years pass—thirty-plus, the sutler judged—yet one who frequently acted like an adolescent. The sutler watched the raw-knuckled hands as they twitched through the motions of rolling a smoke; the hands were the first things he had noticed when this stranger had ridden off the prairie two weeks back, whistling softly, bringing with him a warrant for scout duty, and little else. Not even a pack animal.

Ringler touched off the cigarette and raised his face and winked through the smoke. "Never sit with your back to a door, mister."

The sutler's impulse was to say, *Only a saddle bum would worry about that.* But he didn't, he couldn't, because the eyes stopped him. They were gray-veiled eyes that seemed always to be focused on infinity; they were eyes that sheltered big, lonesome thoughts in a big, lonesome man. So the sutler said, instead:

"There isn't much reason to face an open door, is there?"

Ringler's mouth saddened. "No, there isn't." He spat tobacco shreds. "Friend of mine, name of Tucker, scouted awhile up in the Dakotahs—it was fun then."

"You mean—he had somethin' to do?"

"He had plenty to—" Ringler faced swiftly about and crouched to peer through the fly-specked window. "Oh." He straightened, tugged his belt up, blew out the cigarette, stepped on it. "That poor young punk."

The sutler raised his chins and squinted through the bars of autumn sunlight and saw the trap roll in from the gates and stop at the commandant's quarters. A quick-footed figure wearing dusty blue hopped to the ground and offered a gloved hand to the girl on the seat. She was a graceful girl in a yellow cotton habit and she alighted gracefully and folded her parasol and curtsied.

"What's wrong with him, Ringler?"

"Well—it's a helluva way to get promoted, sparkin' the C.O.'s niece, with only a month of active duty. If I was the C.O., I'd ship that tadpole back to the factory where they make gold shoulder straps, and have the model re-molded."

"So?" The sutler picked up his pen and dipped it. "Why don't you do somethin' about it?" He put his back to the door, drew the ledger toward him, and proceeded to write.

Ringler passed his palms along his hat brim, hitched at his holster, and lanked out. Lieutenant McCain faced him full on, anger already crowding into his face, gloves commencing to jerk in and out, in and out.

"The scout, I take it." Lieutenant McCain was very stiff and very straight and quite sure of himself.

Laureen Waters's saucy side glance was aimed at the pout on his mouth. She was thinking that he would be most acceptable-looking if only he wouldn't pout. Mr. Ringler, here, never pouted.

"I do believe someone is upset." She shot open the parasol and with it shielded from McCain the smile she turned on Ringler. "I do believe Tom is mad at me, Mr. Ringler."

"It should be the other way 'round." Ross ignored McCain entirely.

"Oh?" The parasol was still raised.

"Why, sure. A man who doesn't make a woman angry will never be a

success." He inclined his head to McCain, and winked. "Right—sonny?"

Tom McCain had to lift his voice over Laureen's laughter. "How would you know anything about that?" His hot eyes raked the faded, patched shirt and the worn boots. "You do own some clothes—I guess."

Laureen snapped the parasol shut and tapped Tom McCain's arm. "You'll have to excuse me, please."

Without looking at her, McCain exhaled: "In a minute. I want to speak to you, when he goes."

Ross raised his fingers to his hat, smiled curiously at McCain, and started toward N.C.O.'s Row where he shared a billet with Corporal Klipp. His pockets clinked as he walked, heavy with the forty silver cartwheels he'd drawn that morning as monthly pay, and their clinking kept time with his spurs. Of a sudden he turned into headquarters veranda with the idea of leaving the money with the adjutant for safekeeping, his plan—that afternoon—being to deposit three or four such draws, then quit the duty and ride on South, or west, or north, or wherever he pleased.

Sameness of surroundings always choked him, after a while. He'd never stayed anyplace more than six months, except for that time up in the Bitterroots when he was snowed in for 'most the whole winter with Portugee Peters and they'd played poker with chips carved from the dead hides of their frozen horses. He'd moved on through the thaw, declining Portugee's offer of riding partners on the Double Q brand that summer. Men with horizons in their eyes are like that.

"You saved me a walk. I was just sendin' for you." The sergeant-major swung a thick thumb over his shoulder. "Go see the Old Man."

Major Waters regarded his scout with approval. The major approved of the type of him, the look of him, the hayrake reach of him. He would never ask him to quarters nor would he dine with him off the post, but he would depend on him in the field.

"The lamps have to be strung, Ringler." The major's shrug was apologetic. "It's not your job, but I'd like McCain to learn the country." Waters found sudden fascination in his fingernails. "He won't learn it riding out in a trap with my niece."

"No, sir. He won't. Anyone else?" Humor was hounding his glumness away. It would be vastly amusing, breaking a puppy into an old dog's ways.

"I shouldn't think you'd need anyone else. You'll need a rig to carry the cans. Maybe Klipp could wheel it for you." The major's up-glance was hard. "You haven't crossed any sign, have you?"

"No, sir, I haven't. I made a scout last week, and one the week before. They'll be yippy-yawin' up and down the Pass on a hunt."

"Did you scout the Pass?"

"No, sir. Didn't go near it."

Waters plucked at his lower lip. "What's the old heathen's name? The one you said you knew?"

"Oh. De-na-se-raka. Running Bear. He's a good hunter."

"What else does he do?"

Ringler moved his shoulders in his shirt. "He fights. He was at the Wild Roses fight. He tried to get Crook's pants as a coup, and he damned near did."

"Where did you know him?"

"In the Bitterroots. Me and a man named Peters. We hunted elk together, the three of us."

The major showed his surprise. "After the Wild Roses fight?"

"What's the matter with that? He's a good hunter."

"Some people, Mr. Ringler, are most peculiar." The major sniffed sharply a few times. "Most peculiar. Now listen: avoid the Pass, hear? Show this boot how the terrain lies and which way, and introduce him to the 'steaders. It's part of his training. You can leave in the morning. That's all—Sergeant-major! I want to see Mr. McCain right away!"

The sergeant-major was saying, "I'll get him, sir," voice like rawhide being drawn through a drum, when Ringler passed and murmured, "Let me get him."

Tom McCain was standing on one foot and nudging dust with the other, and Laureen Waters was retreating slowly into the protection of the Virginia creeper that blanketed the porch. Tom McCain's anger had faded to penitence, and Ross Ringler interrupted his pleadings curtly.

"The Old Man, boy. Hop to it!"

McCain came sharp about. "You giving orders?"

"No—just passin' 'em along. The major would have words with you." Ringler watched him trudge down the line, arms swinging, shoulders working. Then he placed a foot on the lower step and offered to give Miss Laureen a map. "It's an old one," he admitted, "but it covers a lot of the area you drive around."

She dipped the parasol in acceptance. "Bring it this evening, if you like." She didn't tell him that Tom McCain would be there too. She didn't have to: Ringler would guess that anyway.

"I should be pleased, Miss."

She tilted her head once. "Is my—the major—is he angry at Tom?"

"No, Miss. In fact, he's about to help him."

Brightness flew across her eyes. "You mean—promote him? So soon?"

Ross Ringler spent a moment with himself, deep inside himself, bearing down on the laughter that was begging to be released. He wondered, in that moment, how any white person west of the Missouri lived to be more than ten years old.

"Miss Laureen, your uncle is sending Mr. McCain with me in the morning to string lamps. Lamp-stringing does not mean a party, it means placing drums of kerosene at hidden spots on high ground near each of the homesteads. That way, should troubles come before the telegraph does, any 'steader in a fix can touch off the drum and the next one nearest the post'll see it, an' so forth, until the sentry at the post sees one burning—unless, of course, he's asleep. The army is largely a housekeeping establishment these days."

"Oh?" She made a little mouth. "Why can't these people get their own kerosene?"

"Because the job of protection is up to the army. The new West, Miss. In the old West, you fried a steak on a shovel, nice-like. Today, you got a stove."

She tilted her head the other way, inspecting him overtly. "You seem to know much about the army, Mr. Ringler. Have you served?"

"I had the honor, Miss, of pickin' the loser—And now I'll kick Klipp out of his bunk."

The plum-blue evening was starless yet and the moon had still to rise.

Ringler approached the commandant's quarters slowly, taking in the pale orange lights, scenting the creeper, still fragrant in early September. Home lights always made him mad at himself, because first they made him sad. And sadness was something he could not control, something forever with him, though not a part of him. It was an imp, mocking his other emotions. Home lights, for Ross Ringler, belonged to other people with other ways, never to him. He could never approach them possessively, for he never would own them. He'd known that for a long time.

She was waiting for him on the porch and he handed her the map and in the same instant decided to leave. The major was inside reading Upton's *Tactics—Probably trying to find where it disagrees with him!*—and he, like the lights, was an immovable barrier.

"You won't stay?"

She was standing close to him then, closer than she had ever been before, and he could smell the silk of her and the hair of her and the verbena in that hair. Monstrously accusative in his mind was the fact that he had shunned the tub since his last scout.

"Thank you, Miss. But—I think I'll—" He broke off and frowned at the thickly hung foliage. Soft footfalls crossed the dust beyond and came nearer. Then Ringler's left arm was locking her to his chest and his gun was out and his voice was scraping, "Don't move."

Tom McCain appeared on the lower step, hands wide, legs spread. "Take your arm off her!" He bent, slightly, at the knees. It was a spring-crouch, and Ross let her go.

Harsh flannel parted from light silk, and he holstered his gun. "Thought for a minute some agency Indian was prowlin' up—you never know."

Her face was down, lowered somewhat away from McCain, and she was smiling.

"Why don't you leave?" Tom McCain hooked a thumb outward. "Older people need more sleep than younger ones."

Ringler's whisper was husky-dry: "Treasure what I gave you, Miss."

"I'll keep it always." She faced full away to hide her smile.

Tom McCain was on the porch, fists rolled, but Ross never gave him a chance to swing. He brushed past him, hip-checked him into a wicker chair, and marched across the blue parade without looking back. He felt happy as he walked, happier than he had in some time. He was still free, after all, and he had a shirt on his back and forty dollars in his jeans and a Kentucky runner he'd won in a poker game in Cheyenne. That was about all a man needed—that and the stars and the sun and the next horizon to ride over.

He wasn't angry with Tom McCain, not yet. It is notable that mules, farrier sergeants, and saddle bums have frayed tempers and a difficult time controlling them because, living always with them, they are eternally conscious of them. It is equally notable that only the mules ever give warning of an explosion.

Dawn in September is chill and thin, then chips away under the blade of the sun until mid-morning's heat is a stabbing torture. Corporal Klipp was out of it, being at the ribbons of the rig and under its canvas hood, but

Ringler and Tom McCain were taking it, burning to it, riding through it.

For an hour they'd been plugging small talk back and forth, tossing it far over that which was between them, avoiding that subject with painful care. The country was dried-out from the furnace-blast of summer and it was when Ringler turned to check again the lashings on the water kegs that there arose in his eyes the faint echo of columns he'd commanded and men he had known.

Of men in white smocks and checkered shirts galloping down the night miles with torches aflame. Of men—later—trig and smart in Confederate gray as they trailed across Kansas and Missouri and into the red mud of the Virginias. And later still, there had been fewer men, and none were trig or smart. For years afterward, none of those that survived those columns could sit with safety at an unshuttered window or an open door.

"What're you staring at?" McCain sounded almost friendly.

Ringler snapped his mind forward a dozen years and let out his breath. "Kegs."

"So?" A lop-sided grin softened Tom McCain's mouth. "I was staring at your horse." He came further abreast on lifted reins and spinning rowels. "It's a nice one." The grin sank to what was intended for a professional frown. "Where'd you get him?"

"You sound like a Remount officer. Where'd I get him? Up Cheyenne way, a year or so ago. I got him with an inside straight."

"Oh—gambled him, huh?"

"It was no gamble, boy. I used my own cards." Ringler pointed south. "That's Hackett's Ordinary yonder. Hog ranch, dormitory, water tank. We leave a drum with them, they'll hoist it to the tank top."

McCain stayed abreast. "Kentucky, isn't he?" He moved his face up and down. "You ride him like a soldier, not like a scout."

Ringler let him have it—softly, deliberately, vibrantly. "Mister, I rode with Quantrill."

The name hung between them like a dead man's coat.

"The Reb renegade?"

Ringler spoke through his side teeth. "The Confederate raider, boy—and don't ever forget it. Four years I rode with him, until that time in Taylorsville when they chopped him to pieces."

"They should have! He massacred the wounded."

Ross Ringler licked sun-split lips. "He was paid in grade to kill Yanks, no matter what their condition. Now forget it."—*You'll be all right, kid, when your mind gets as hard as your body and you learn to see farther than your shoulder straps. You'll be all right*—"if you live long enough."

"What's that?"

"Nothin'. We go left here, for Hackett's. I want you two to meet. Klipp! Wake up."

They camped dry that night and they raised Worden's in the morning and took coffee there. Worden said he wasn't running fence because of hunt parties, and hunt parties always cut fence. "They oughta herd 'em all into agencies, I say." The man Worden spat gloomily.

"In winter, they all come in for beef anyway." Ringler drained his mug. "Where'd you see these hunt parties?"

"I didn't, my hand did. West—near the Pass."

Ringler mounted up. "You worried, Worden?"

"He-e-ell, no." But the man's eyes were restless, and he couldn't keep his fingers still.

They crossed the Republican's parched bottoms and reached Yancey's by mid-afternoon; and short of twilight they cut back north for the post and that night they camped dry again, barely within sight of Thunder Pass.

Tom McCain broke silence on the avoided subject, then. "She's one sweet girl, Ringler." It was neither warning nor threat, merely a statement.

"Yes, she is."

The stars were out, and Ross wanted to watch the stars. He could talk about females anytime. Hell, he could tell this McCain things about females that this McCain wouldn't see or hear in twenty years. *In Chihuahua, McCain, they rub you down with rose wine, afterward*—But now the stars were scattered across a million miles of heaven and the night air was sweet and forty cartwheels wanted to roll west, or south—

"She's really mine, Ringler. You know that."

"You say? Oh-h, lissen, boy." Ross came up on one elbow, braced with his back to Klipp's ruffling snores. "You're goin' about it the wrong way, see?"

"I don't follow your meaning, Ringler."

—If someone had only told me! If I'd known twelve-fifteen-eighteen years back what I know now, what I found out for myself! But would it have made any difference—?

The question kept pointing at him. "You're falling an' bobbing. You're begging. Never beg, boy. It isn't a good idea in any enterprise. Best thing to do is one, big, unexpected thing." Ringler's fingers popped in the dark. "That's what they like."

"Such as?" McCain's voice was a sneer.

"Well." Ringler was suddenly tickled with a thought. "You could flush an Indian out've the creepers." He fell off his elbow and rolled over. "Now get some sleep, Lieutenant. It's good for youngsters."

Once that morning they saw dust draping the western distances, and twice they rode past butchered carcasses. Sixteen of them, at one place. Toward noon they were flanking the up-sloping country at the crest of which was the slot of the Pass, and Ringler led the way off it, keeping to the flatland.

McCain demurred. "I'd like to see a hunt camp."

"You'll see plenty—some other time. We've still got two more stops to make."

"It'd be something to tell her. What are they—Kiowas?"

"Comanches. They come north in the autumn sometimes. I got to know one once."

McCain reined down. "Personally?" Eager interest quickened his voice. "I want some souvenirs. If you happen to know—"

"They'll make a souvenir out of you, if you bother 'em. We swing east of the Pass, here, not into it."

Corporal Klipp's rubbery face was full awake and intense; he half-set the brake handle and held in his reins until it was decided which way they would go. Abstaining from interference in higher-level decisions was one way he had become a corporal.

"It'd be nice for her, you know. Some headdresses, or a lance." McCain stood in his stirrups to see farther ahead.

"There are no headdresses on a hunt

party, mister." And Ringler, too, was conning the yellow rise leading to the centuries-old highway from the hills to the buffalo grounds. The Comanche legend was that the Pass was the home of thunder, and that thunder had been created by the smashing hoofs of generations of ponies. "You better forget it."

McCain lowered his butt to the saddle. "There isn't any war that I know of. Can't a man trade?"

"Trade what? Money? They don't know what it is! So don't start a war, McCain."

"I have some beltings they might use." Already Tom McCain was putting his horse northwest to the sloping ground. Without turning he called, "Lose all your curiosity with Quantrill?"

That was when the temper roweled Ringler and left him shuddering. He grabbed out his gun and slung it to Klipp, not trusting himself with it; he circled back and galloped in small circles until the bombardment was gone from his brain and his muscles were calm again.

"All right, Klipp, so we go too. Give me that gun."

They let Tom McCain stay ahead, fearless in his ignorance. They let him point the way up to the crumbling timber bearding a shoulder below the Pass, and only when he pushed into that timber did they close up on him. Ringler was fearful when he saw the camp, and fear is a valuable thing in the field. The camp was in a man-high cutback on a bald rise surrounded by naked trees, and there wasn't a squaw or a child in sight.

"Stay with us, Klipp. Don't leave that seat."

The smell of an Indian is the smell of limestain and animal grease. It is the sweet-rancid stench of newly gutted buffalo bellies and stale tobacco and long-soiled buckskins. It is old furs and stained hides and sweat.

Running Bear was smaller than Ringler remembered him; but then, in the early mountain winter, he had been wrapped in robes. He stood in patched leggings, fronting his silent men; his long arms hung from the tattered sleeves of a weather-used flannel shirt that once had been blue. From the field of the Wild Roses, Ringler guessed.

He shoved the heel of a palm frontward.

"How is it with my brother?"

There was no welcome in the answer. "Why does my brother interfere?"

"We bring gifts for the mighty hunter."

Running Bear shot spit. "So did Crook."

McCain was impatient. "Tell him I want a parfleche shield. I'll swap for it."

Ringler drew in a breath. "We observe no women, nor children, nor tipis."

"They butcher and divide"—he made an arm gesture—"below on the grounds."

"And the camp of Running Bear?"

"It is a camp at peace, preparing to thank the gods of the Hunting Moon."

There had been other camps at peace, Ringler reflected. The Santee camp of Little Crow had been at peace that Sunday near New Ulm—the morning of the day New Ulm had fallen to the torch and the war ax. Down at Hackett's, this day, were women and other livestock. Although, of course, you never could tell. Except that the

hunting moon was next month, not this one.

Ringler counted the silent hunters as he spoke. "The young absaroka"—he used the Crow word understood universally—"wishes a shield. He offers to pay." There were twenty-three men behind Running Bear.

"Tell him to leave. You leave with him."

"McCain? It's my opinion that we get to hell out of here and track back to the post. I don't like him and I don't like his compadres and I don't like the way he counts his calendar months."

"Don't be faced down, Ringler." Tom McCain had heard that somewhere. They'd told him that if an Indian faced you down, you were a goner. "I've demanded a shield, I'll get a shield." He snagged out his revolver and clutched it to his hip. "If I have to take it!"

The childish curiosity of the hunters was hardening to something else; Running Bear turned away from the gun and made gestures to them and quacked commands. One by one, they retrieved lances, shields, rifles. One by one, they filed off the bald rise, and it was then that Ringler saw their ponies down-slope in the timber.

McCain holstered. "See? They're going on down to join the others, if there are others, and go home."

"McCain." Ross Ringler swung off and pulled his Kentucky farther into the cutback. "McCain—Klipp, bring the wagon in."

"Thought you wanted to go home." Tom McCain dismounted, sensing uneasiness at Ringler's quiet deliberativeness.

"I do. Now look, McCain; where's your shield?"

"Well—I can get it another time." The first flicker of fear was running across his eyes.

"There won't be another time. Unhitch, Klipp. We'll stay here awhile." His smile was sick, Klipp looked sick.

Tom McCain's voice fluted nervously as he flung out his hands. Monstrous awareness was entering his eyes. "Why can't we just mount and ride? They've gone!"

Corporal Klipp needed to say several things, but let Ringler say them for him. Men may be equal in death, but while they're still alive and one has two stripes and the other has two bars—Ringler removed a glove, twirled it, drew it back, and cracked it across McCain's mouth. He brought it through again on the backhand and the buckle sliced an upper lip.

Tom McCain's elbow signaled his move for his gun and Ringler whipped in a hard, stomach-shaking left and a right to the chest that sent McCain sprawling and tripping and left him on his butt in the dust, gasping.

"Now put that gun to use for us, not against us." Ringler thought of Laureen Waters then, and unaccountably to himself he reached down and grasped Tom McCain's wrist and hauled him out of the dust. "Lean against the cutback, take off your hat, keep spare shot in your teeth. Aim ahead of your target."

Klipp was grinning at the traces as he unhitched and staked the team. This would be a yarn for the boys in hell, when he got there. He'd get there with full pay in his pockets, too, by God.

They came in a swirling rush, hard down behind the throw of their ponies' necks. They came rat-fast and fang-sharp across the amber veil of twilight and the thrumming of unshod hoofs

was an irregular chorus for the irregular smacking of shots that ripped into the cutback with the tearing sound of grommets being torn from tarpaulin. And then they spun away into the timber and left two hunters lying tangled-limbed and still on the bareness of the rise.

Tom McCain let out his breath, shivering in his shirt.

Ringler blew smoke from his revolver's lip, and re-loaded. "Two isn't much," was all he said. "That leaves twenty-two of 'em."

McCain found his voice. "Against three."

They all looked at each other. Klipp cleared his throat. "They'll come ag'in, too."

Tom McCain swallowed, face green-white in the last backwash of light. "Not after dark. I heard it somewhere. They won't die in the dark."

Ringler's wink was for anybody. "Comanches, mister, fight at night. Only ones do." He cocked his hammer and laid the weapon on a stone. "They love it."

And then he was a little boy again, without future, without past, without responsibility or memory. The world lay ahead over the prairie somewhere, and there was all the time in Christendom to go get it. For the moment, he was playing Indian in the barn with a neighbor's kid, and in the house his mother was frying cornsticks and pretty soon the war in the barn would be over—And then the moment dissolved into darkness and the memory was lashed from his mind by the black lariat of night and he was braced against a rocky side waiting to be murdered because a boy had wanted a toy to give to a girl.

Tom McCain was apologetic. "I guess, Ringler, I won't be able to—to do that. To pull one unexpected act. Grab her, like, when she won't know it's coming—"

The shot slapped sharply in their ears and the bullet slocked into the rig. They fired at where it had come from and there was a yell and the slip-crunch of retreating feet.

Attrition, Ringler knew. They'll spend the night wearing us down, creeping around us, maybe rushing us, come dawn. All the good ones used it—Crazy Horse and Roman Nose and Running Bear. A good trick, when you've got the odds.

Another shot clanged against a wheel rim and the echo tinkled away into the night. No one fired back; no one had seen it.

"It's leakin'." Klipp sounded hurt, sounded insulted. "The kerosene."

"Let it leak." Ringler slid his eyes left and right, left and right, trying to catch a movement. "If we could only see 'em."

"What about the moon?"

His head-shake was swift. "Not 'til later, much later."

Klipp giggled. "They holed one of them drums clean, near the bottom."

"Forget it. Keep watch on that side." Ross Ringler moved his weight, and heard the dollars clink. Come morning, he supposed, those dollars would be laced onto shields and carried down to Hackett's. This wasn't a hunt party any more, it was a war party. Once they got worked up, they carried on for days—The nose-tingling smell of the kerosene came to his nostrils.

Something burst in his head. "Klipp!" He was pipe-voiced with surprise. "Klipp—we'll show Mr. McCain, here, what I meant!" He felt his way to the wagon. "Get a line—a cinch

strap—anything. Tie the shaft up, clear of the ground—"

He whispered the rest of it, whispered it rowel-sharp; whispered to them as he shoved their arms into motion. And then they strained at the wheel rims and propelled the rig clear of the cutback and poised it on the crest. Ringler put his gun full against the leaking drum and fired and the muzzle blast caught like a match.

"Now!"

They heaved spokes upward and headed the rig for the timber and let it roll. It rocked and swayed and caught fire and movement at the same time and clanked drunkenly off the rise leaving hot daylight behind. The other drum caught and the canvas hood boomed open and then the off wheel struck rock and the fire wagon collapsed on a balk end and hung an instant and crashed over into the first of the timber.

Coyote howls broke wide and dark figures leaped across the light and the timber rumbled into bright orange flame that leaped and licked and lunged its way around the dryness and flushed the figures high off their feet.

"Squeeze 'em off slow!" Ringler fired carefully and flopped a man over. The broken-ice bark of McCain's gun pierced his ears and he re-aimed and laid another one in and saw a running man jerk loosely and fold at the knees and sit down and fall forward. Then animal-fear of wild flames had them and they were scattering for their plunging ponies and catching them up and pounding into the Pass.

Ringler kept firing until the dry click told him to re-load.

He stood high on his boot soles, but there were no more targets; and McCain was laughing and Klipp was sobbing and Ringler was laughing and telling Tom McCain to quick catch a shield before the fire got them all.

They cantered down away from the Pass through the last of the unscorched timber with the team on a lead, and clear of the slope and when the prairie grass was whispering against forelegs, they stopped and swung down and watched the shaking red sky awhile.

"Hope that sentry's awake. The major can be here before mid-morning."

Klipp slid off the Kentucky's haunches and mounted the near team animal. The yarn in hell would have to wait.

"Klipp, you know the way home. Take it. I'm movin' south."

"South? What's wrong with the army?"

Tom McCain's tone was strange. "You quitting?" He placed his face closer. "Here's a chance to be a hero."

"Flannel and silk don't mix. Someday, you'll come to understand that." Ross collected rein. "Some people, mister, are peculiar."

McCain nodded, and tongued his cut lip, and tried to think of something to say. He asked, "Any message? For anyone?" He could offer that, at least.

"Well—you might tell the major to have that creeper cut. You won't need it now."—*I'll never tell you about that time on the porch, boy, and she won't either. It'll be best for both of you, that way. You'll never take her completely for granted, ever.*

"McCain, the simple thing is always the most surprising. You go right up and pull her into that wicker chair—but don't let the Old Man see you. She won't fight you long."

He didn't even shake hands. He turned away south under the rising moon, setting his mind on a place in

Chihuahua he had cause to know, dallying with the idea of maybe finding Portugee Peters at the Double Q, maybe not. He had a shirt on his back and forty dollars in his pants and a Kentucky runner between his legs, and that's about all a man could ask for, under the stars at night alone.

He trailed on down the prairie, whistling softly, riding out his destiny with his mind shut to the past and no plans for the future at all.

SADDLE-ESCORT MANNERS

By C. Wiles Hallock

BUCKAROOS ain't often heard to acerbate and jaw
In envy of the lot of other men;
Waddies seldom argify or grumble if they draw
Some extry-special duties now and then.
One afflictin' circumstance of superchorin', though,
(Than which I'd ruther rassle steers instead!)
Calls for talkin' elegant and saddle-ramblin' slow,
Escortin' wimminfolks around the spread.

Tain't because I disincline to be a ladies' man;
I got profound admirin' for the sex;
Squirin' sister-bein's which is *hoss-accustomed* can
Be pleasureful in quite a few respecks;
Chaperonin' gals which knows a grulla from a steer
And diff'rence twixt a dogie and a hound,
That's okay; but I'm a certain stiff which doesn't keer
To wrangle *lady tenderfoots* around!

Females unfamiliar with our wild cow-country ways
Gits peevish when a saddle rubs 'em sore;
Other pompous sisters can't determine all their days
The hind end of a broomtail from the fore!
'Tain't contrariness to toil which agitates my soul;
I'll tangle with a flood or avalanche—
But extry-special *manners* gits me irked beyond control
When wimmin come to ram around the ranch!

STOP BURNING YOUR MONEY

Don't let the tobacco habit burn a hole in your pay packet! Stop smoking the sure way – the easy way – with APAL, an imitation cigarette that you never light. Its clean soothing taste kills the tobacco craving *at once.* No strained nerves! No frayed tempers! It's a pleasure to stop smoking (and start saving) with APAL!

READ WHAT APAL USERS SAY

Regd. Trade Mark

Dear Sirs,—I received my APAL more than two years ago. When it arrived I did not use it for some time, then one day I thought well I paid for it lets have a go. At that time I was smoking 40 cigarettes a day. I put the APAL in my mouth, and I have never smoked since. To me it seemed a miracle. To sum up, I am feeling good, I can take the children out for a day instead of telling them we cannot afford it, and generally I always have a few shillings in my pocket instead of being permanently broke.
J.K., Leiston

Dear Sirs,—I thought I would write. I received my APAL some months ago, my family and I have STOPPED SMOKING, so I say thank you.
E.R., Wilsden

Dear Sirs,—I have never had more pleasure in writing a letter than this one. I started using the APAL the day it arrived, and have not touched a cigarette since. I smoked about 20 cigarettes a day for more than 20 years. I cannot speak too highly of your APAL. I bless the day I sent for an APAL. J.D., Portsmouth

Dear Sirs,—About two months ago I sent for an APAL, I found it truly remarkable, I gave up smoking without any discomfort and a longing for a smoke. I am truly grateful. Mrs. M.C., Kent

Dear Sirs,—It is now almost twelve months since I got an APAL, although I was a chain smoker until the APAL arrived. I have not had the slightest inclination to take up smoking since I got my APAL.
Mrs. E.K., Dublin

Dear Sirs,—Some little time ago I sent for three APALS, for my wife, daughter and self. I was not very popular for doing this, however, since they arrived between us we have saved over £7 on cigarettes. We have completely conquered the cigarette habit. Had this state of affairs been prophesied a month ago I would never have believed it. P.O., Morthen

Dear Sirs,—One week to-morrow I received an APAL. I never thought that such a small insignificant thing could help me, but I can definitely say that it is the finest cure on the market. R.B., Nuneaton

Dear Sirs,—My APAL has been so successful that I have recommended it to several of my friends, so please send one to Mrs. M.T. Mrs. G.B., Lancs.

Dear Sirs,—I purchased an APAL in January and was amazed at its efficiency. I was smoking 45 a day, but now I no longer want to smoke.
M.W., Harrogate

Dear Sirs,—I am sending for an APAL. I have been rather impressed by recommendations received from personal acquaintances of mine. E.E., Ammanford

Dear Sirs,—I wish to thank you for the APAL you sent me some time ago as I have not smoked since. I am sending for one to give a friend.
Mrs. M.Z., Goldicote

Dear Sirs,—It is three months since I purchased my APAL. Two puffs from my APAL and smoking was cured. Thanks again, and again.
L.H., Pewlonds Gill

Dear Sirs,—After some delay I wish to report on the success of my APAL. I received it on the 28th February at 08.00 hours and replaced it for a cigarette, and I am happy to say that I have not smoked since. I was a heavy smoker for 10 years.
E.S., Shorncliffe

Dear Sirs,—I received my APAL only eight days ago, and what A PAL. I stopped smoking right away, no more craving; it's wonderful. I have been burning money for 12 years, now I have the pleasure in banking £1 a week—no more morning coughing.
Miss F.J., Bromley

Dear Sirs,—I want two APAL sent air-mail for my friends, who were rather surprised of the marvellous effect it had on me when I stopped smoking two years ago. E.F., Tanga

Please send stamped, addressed envelope for full particulars, free advice and PROOF!

HEALTH CULTURE ASSOCIATION

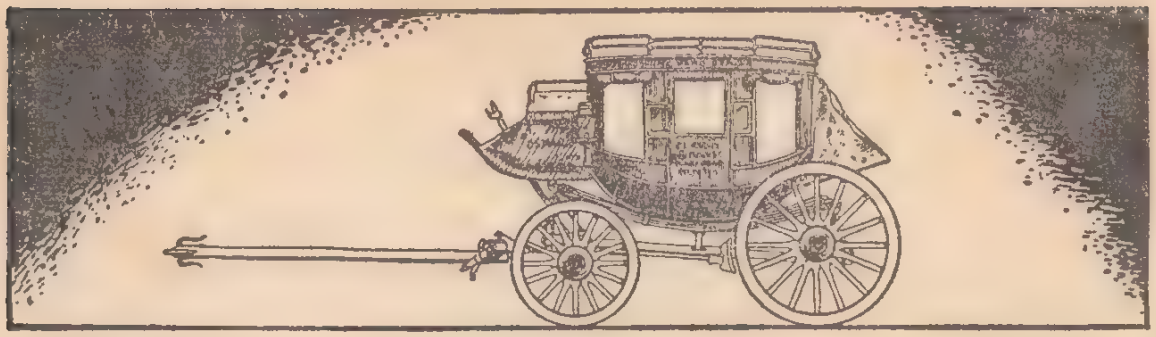
(Dept. 45) 245 High Holborn, London, W. C. 1

STAGECOACHES FROM CONCORD

Story and Pictures by Randy Steffen

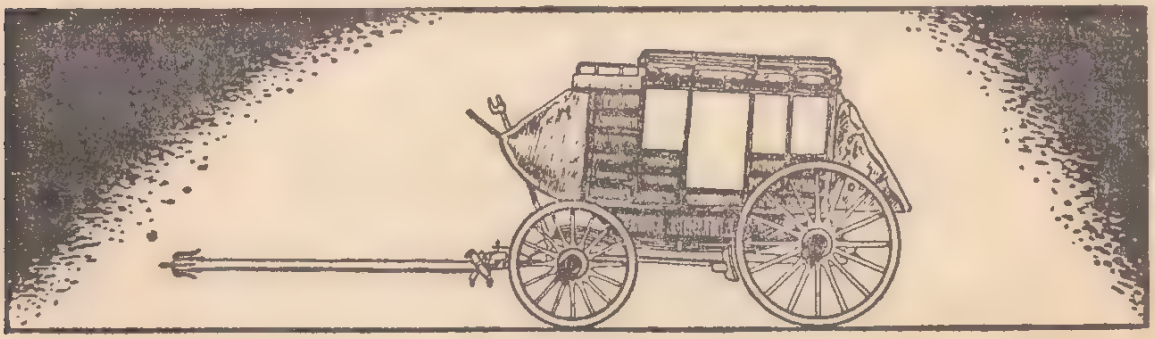
THE deluxe transportation of the Old West is no more. The last of the ponderous Concord coaches was placed in honorable retirement shortly after the turn of the century when the railroad came to connect the border towns of West Texas. Today the stagecoach is a museum piece, but no vehicle typified more drama and action than did the stagecoaches from Concord.

The firm of Abbott, Downing & Company in Concord, New Hampshire, were the makers of the Concord coaches, and no other manufacturer ever duplicated their excellence. By 1858 this firm was able to boast of their thirteen acres of factory buildings as the largest establishment of its kind in the United States, and their coaches were to dominate the highways of Mexico, South America, Australia, and South Africa. The universal popularity of these coaches was justified by their ability to hold together on the worst roads of any continent and under the most diverse climatic conditions. No other make could hold a candle to the Concord coach on the world's frontiers. History was made in the dust of its passing.



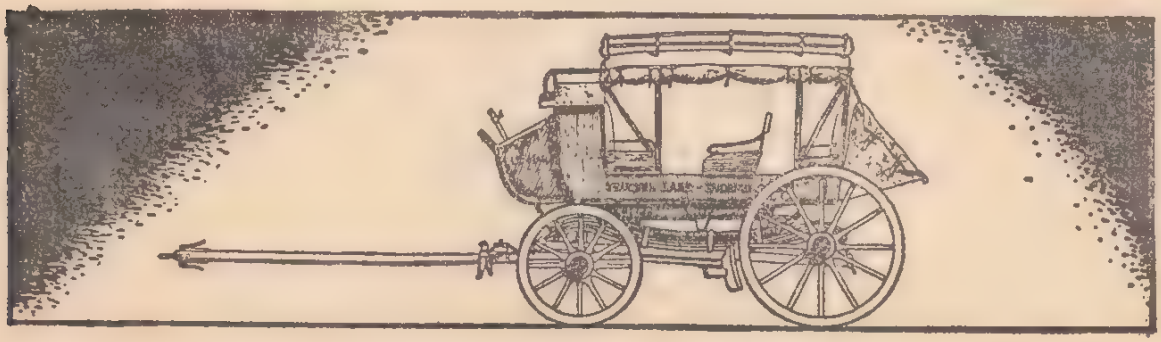
MAIL COACH

The most familiar of the Concord models was the Mail Coach. Its body of compound curves was a masterpiece of design and craftsmanship. Frames of well-seasoned ash and decking of the clearest poplar made the Concord Mail Coach a rugged beauty. The heaviest of the Concord vehicles, it weighed 2400 pounds and sold for about a dollar a pound in California.



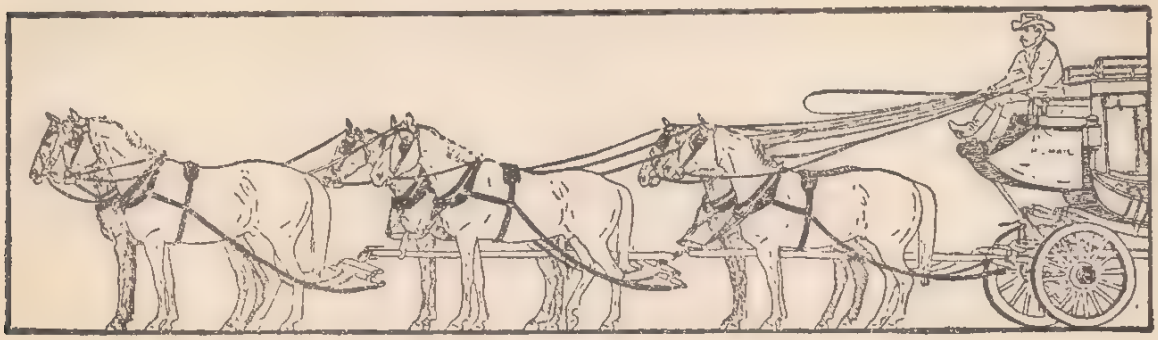
MUD WAGON

The Concord Mud Wagon was a much lighter coach and built closer to the ground, especially designed for traveling in rough, mountainous country. Like the Mail Coach, it seated nine inside, with room for a dozen more on top. Baggage was stowed fore and aft in leather boots. Mail pouches and express strong boxes were carried in the boot under the driver's seat.



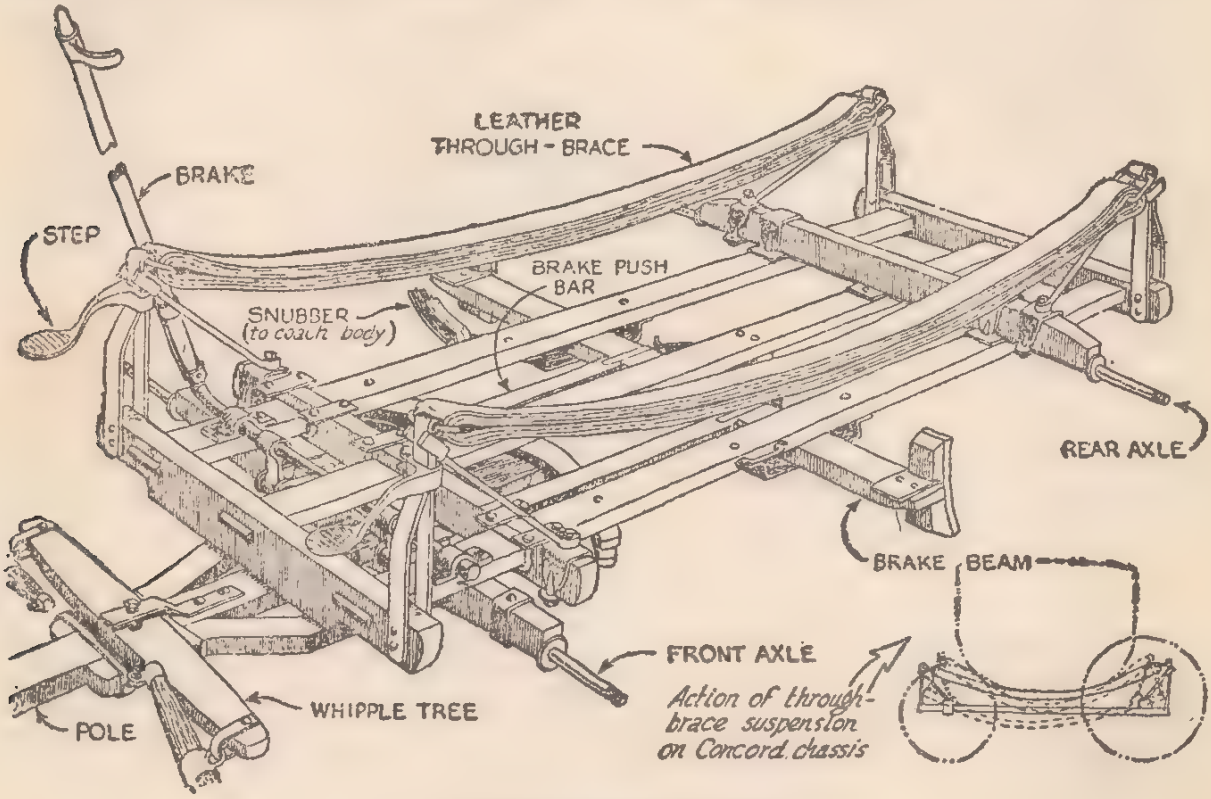
PASSENGER HACK WAGON

The Passenger Hack Wagon, affording less protection to passengers, was used for short local hauls. Like the Mud Wagon, it was lighter than the Mail Coach but had the same seating capacity.



CONCORD TEAM

Six-horse teams were almost always used for the heavy Mail Coaches, while both four- and six-horse hitches were used for the Mud Wagon and Passenger Hack Wagon. The drawing shows details of harness and lines.



CONCORD CHASSIS
(Mail Coach)

Chassis and methods of suspending the leather through-braces differed some on Mud Wagon and Passenger Hack, but the principle of shock absorption was identical. No other system was as easy on stage horses as this one.

EIGHT GLANDS
CONTROL YOUR DESTINY

and Gland Regeneration is now within your power

MODERN SCIENCE laid its hand on the kernel of all human life—glands. Through glandular regeneration it opened up new horizons in every human activity. These are the simple facts. All your activities and your physical and mental characteristics, your height, your weight, your temper, depend upon the action of your EDOCRINE or DUCTLESS glands. These are, in a man, the THYROID, PARATHYROID, PITUITARY, ADRENAL, THYMUS, PINEAL, PROSTATE, ORCHIS. And, in a woman, THYROID, PARATHYROID, PITUITARY, ADRENAL and OVARIES. These glands, as well as having independent functions, work together as a system. Their secretions, circulated through your blood stream, dominate all your energies—mental, physical, nervous, and sexual.

A MAN IS AS OLD AS HIS GLANDS

On the strength and the balance of these secretions depends your strength. Your power can be at its height only when your glands are functioning rightly. Weakness is as much the result of ill-balance as of deficiency. But ill-balance or deficiency—it can be cured by Hormone Therapy.

DO YOU SUFFER from premature ageing, loss of energy and vitality, weakness, tiredness, sleeplessness, poor appetite, bodily aches and pains, failing eyesight, falling hair, nerves, neurasthenia, brain-fag, nervous digestive disorders, partial or total loss of virile tone? In fact, are your energies co-ordinated? All these conditions are symptoms of deficiency or bad balance which can only be treated through your glands.

HORMONE THERAPY or Gland Therapy, is the science of rejuvenation through the regeneration of the glands. It works on the opposite principle to drugs—it refurnishes, and does not merely stimulate your vital energies. It goes right to the core of physical, mental, nervous or sexual weakness. When the science of Hormone Therapy had made possible this astonishing treatment, British Glandular Products put on the market glandular compounds for men and women. It has been proved that they give back the fullness of energy which through illness, age or even chronic weakness has been lost.

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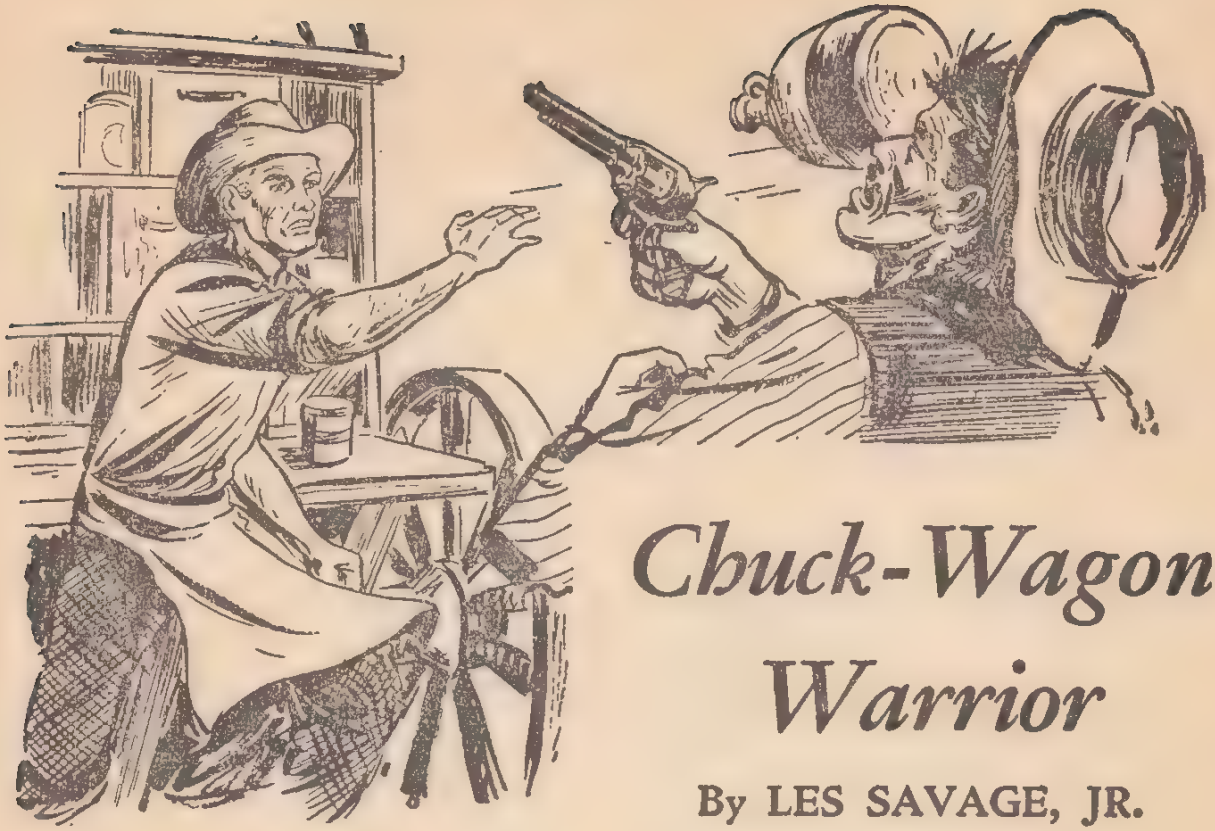


Chuck-Wagon Warrior

By LES SAVAGE, JR.

The new camp cook keeps plenty busy, telling how he got his name, baking a bull's head, falling in love with the Double Crown's pretty but troubled mistress, and trying to solve the mystery of his vanished predecessor.

WHEN the fire was going good, Larrup shoveled hot coals across the sheet of corrugated iron on the ground and put three skillets on to heat. The roundup crew was already drifting in. Rigger came from the Texas brush on a played-out cutting mare. He was twenty feet away when Larrup began to smell the rancid bacon grease he smeared on his long yellow hair.

"How's the new belly cheater?" Rigger grinned.

"You want me to cook your dinner or stop and gab?" Larrup asked.

"You must be better'n the other cook, you're sure ornerier," Rigger chuckled. He got off the mare and began hunting through the pockets of his jacket. "Looks like I'm out of makin's, Larrup. Got a quirly?"

"I chaw," Larrup said.

Rigger sighed disconsolately. Then a strange expression came to his gaunt face, and he stared around the clearing. At this moment, Skid rode from the brush. He was the ramrod of the Double Crown, tall and dour and slack as a piece of old hemp.

"Skid," Rigger said. "I didn't realize it when we pulled in this morning. This looks like the place Charlie disappeared."

Skid gave him a sharp glance. "Shut up," he said.

Larrup glanced up. This was the first time he'd heard them mention the cook he had replaced. Somehow he sensed that it was connected with the strange tension he had felt in the whole crew. But the anger pinching the edges of the foreman's eyes stopped Larrup from asking. He turned before Skid caught his glance, and began pouring water in the coffeepot. He'd cooked in enough roundup camps to know when it was better to mind his own business.

Before the pot was full, Wrangatang rode in. He was the wrangler, a tattered kid of seventeen with a face older than his years. He watched Larrup set the coffeepot down and bank a shovelful of coals on its windward side.

"Old cook used to put the pot right in the fire," Wrangatang said slyly.

"He musta learned to cook in a sheep camp," Larrup told him.

"Sure, Wrangatang," Rigger mocked. "Don't you know any belly cheater worth his salt never cooks right in a wood fire?"

Wrangatang glanced around the clearing. "Speakin' of belly cheaters, ain't this where the last cook disappeared?"

"I said shut up, damn you!" Skid's voice cracked like a whip and the tow-headed wrangler jumped a foot out of his saddle.

Then the foreman hiked one long leg over the slickhorn and slid from his lathered blue-tick roan. He took his Stetson off by the brim and beat it absently against his leg as he frowned around at the brush.

"Got a quirly, Skid?" Rigger asked.

"Roll your own," the foreman said irritably.

Larrup went methodically on with his work, taking it all in. He got a double handful of dough from the sourdough keg and rolled it out on the tail gate of the chuck wagon, skillet-size and rawhide-thin. Then he flipped it into the first skillet, setting this back on the bed of coals, putting a lid on, and shoveling more hot coals on top.

When he was at work, the fluid skill of his movements seemed to rob his lean body of its awkward look. His face was as brick-red as his hair, spattered with freckles, and the professional crankiness of a chuck-wagon cook was belied by the wry quirks that kept coming and going at the tips of his mouth.

He spooned pinto beans from a glass jar into the second skillet, and while he was slicing bacon rind and garlic into it, Silent Joe Smith and Dally rode in. Silent Joe Smith dismounted and began to unsaddle.

Rigger sidled over to him. "You got a quirly, Joe?" Silent Joe Smith heaved his saddle off and carried it to the chuck wagon. Rigger spat after him. "Forget it. You really must have a dirty back trail if it keeps you that clammed up."

"Slack off, Rigger," Dally told him. "We all got a right to our past."

Rigger frowned. "Makes me sour when I run out of makin's."

"At that rate, you should be a reg'lar lemon," cackled Wrangatang.

Rigger picked up a handful of dirt and flung it at him. It almost hit the two riders coming out of the thickets. George Adams led, a ponderous kettle-gutted man, the boss of the Double Crown. His Prince Albert had satin lapels and his Stetson was bone-white and his grin looked like a campaigning politician's.

"Appears as how our new cookie knows the ropes," he chuckled expansively. "Any man that can have chuck ready before them Mexicans bulge in is fast. Yes sir. Holy fast."

Larrup hardly heard the man. He was looking at Adams's niece.

Roma Adams sat a fiddle-footed mare right behind her uncle, and the wind had blown her blue-black hair into impish curls all about her flushed face. There was a puckish mischief to her snapping black eyes and full smiling lips.

George Adams got off his big Choppo horse with a loud squawk of rigging. "Came out to see how the tally books were filling up, Skid. Can I have a look?"

The foreman took a couple of beef books from his hip pocket and went over to Adams. Roma slid off her fiddling mare and came smiling to Larrup.

"Charlie always had some pun'kin candy."

It was so much like a little kid he had to grin. "Ain't got none of that. We can mix up a batch of Charlie Taylor to put on that pan bread."

"I'll wait around on one condition," she said; "that you tell me how you got your name."

He got a jug of molasses from the shelf and took the plug out. Then he gave a hitch to his belt.

"Larrup is what they call molasses up in Deaf Smith County," he said. "They make it so thick if you got your hand stuck in it you couldn't pull it out. When I was a little button, I fell into a big vat of larrup Pa was making out back. It was like trying to pull me out of cement. Menfolks came from miles around to help. It was just like a house-raising. Whole families camped on the place for nights on end. There was horse races and square dances and everybody got drunk as grandpa at the fair. But nobody could pull me up. Be too big a waste to pour all that molasses out. They had to eat buckwheat cakes for six months before it got low enough so's I could be pulled free."

Her chuckle dipped her chin in, digging a satiny furrow in the soft flesh beneath her jaw. He was so taken up with looking that he didn't realize how long he'd been holding the jug upside down.

"Feels like something's clogged it up," he said, shaking it. "You lived with your uncle all your life?"

"Dad and Mother died three years ago," she told him. "Uncle George was appointed executor by the courts. He'll keep the ranch going for me till I'm of age."

He set the jug down disgustedly. "A six-hitch team couldn't drag this larrup out. We'll have to be satisfied with prickly-pear jelly."

She smiled. "You're even better than Charlie."

He gave her an oblique glance. "What's all this mystery about Charlie?"

All the humor left her. "He just disappeared," she said darkly. "About a week ago. He was going to roast a bull's head for Enrique and Toro. They were the first back from roundup. Charlie wasn't anywhere around. The whole crew beat the brush for him. Not a sign."

"That's sort of funny," he frowned. "Toro said he'd get me a bull today for some fresh beefsteaks if I'd roast its head for him—"

He broke off at a sudden great crash from out in the brush, and Roma

whirled, eyes widening mischievously. "Sounds like they're coming now," she giggled.

Larrup could hear them shouting a long time before the bull finally burst out of the thickets. Both the Mexicans had their ropes on it, and the beast was hauling them in its wake like two feathers in the wind.

"Hola," shouted Toro. "Get out of his way. We can't hold him."

The crew scattered. The bull saw the chuck wagon and veered that way, yawing and heaving on the ropes. Roma started to run from the wagon, but tripped and fell.

"Get up, Roma," Toro bawled. "We can't stop him—"

Roma rolled over, shaking her head dazedly. Larrup saw she would never make it. He lunged out after her. The bull looked big as a house coming down on him. He caught the girl under the arms and threw himself backward with her. They rolled beneath the wagon as the bull thundered by, hooking vindictively at a wheel.

Sprawled beside Larrup under the wagon, Roma looked at him with fluttering eyes. A shaky laugh escaped her.

"I guess you saved my life."

His grin was embarrassed. "I'd like to do it every day."

Part of the fright had left her, and she managed a faint smile. "I'd rather try something a little less strenuous."

"How about a buggy ride some night," he said. "The moon's wonderful this time of year."

She tried to look shocked. "You pick strange places to ask a girl something like that." Then she sighed wistfully. "Strange place or not, you're the first man who's even asked me in a long time."

He frowned at her. "I should think they'd be lined up at your door."

"They're all afraid of Uncle George," she said disconsolately, and then started to get up.

He saw that the whole crew was still fighting the bull out in the clearing, and caught her arm.

"Why does your uncle keep you on such a tight string?" he said. "Does it have anything to do with what's going on here?"

On her hands and knees, she looked at him sharply. "You feel it too, then ?" she said.

"Feel what?" he asked.

"I don't know." She shook her head helplessly. "Just something. The crew's so jumpy. Everything's so strange."

"Roma," called Adams. "What are you doing?"

Larrup looked up to see that the noise had died down, the crew having finally thrown the bull in the middle of the clearing.

"I was telling her how I got my name," he said.

Adams frowned at him, then snorted. "How did you?"

Larrup climbed from beneath the wagon, giving a hitch to his belt. "Harks back to when I was up in Wyoming, cooking for the Hearts and Sevens outfit. All the boys kept ragging me about being slower than molasses in January. I got tired of it and told them I'd race a jug of molasses just to show them. The ramrod and me took a jug of blackstrap up to the top of a big hill. The ramrod poured the molasses out. As soon as it started running down, I started running too. The whole crew was waiting at the bottom to see who come out first."

"Who beat?"

"The molasses."

"Aw, now, Larrup," Wrangatang said. "You know molasses won't run downhill."

Adams came over to the wagon, staring down at Roma with a strange smile. "Now that's not what you were talking about, my dear. Tell your uncle the truth."

She had climbed from beneath the wagon, and she dropped her eyes, brushing uncomfortably at her dirty clothes. "We were just talking about Charlie," she said in a low voice.

"Charlie." It left Adams in a whisper. He sent a glance at Skid, and then tried to hide it. He began to get red. "I guess you and I better go home," he said.

Roma looked up swiftly. "But Larrup was going to put some Charlie Taylor on a piece of pan bread for me—"

Adams tucked his chin in, the smile spreading over his face like oil. "My dear," he said softly.

Larrup saw fear steal through Roma's eyes. She turned and went to her horse. Adams followed, mounting his own animal. Without looking at any of them, he followed her out of the clearing, still smiling at her back.

"Poor little gal," Dally said.

Larrup looked at him. "How's that?"

Dally turned away, coiling up a rope. "Nothin'."

Toro had stepped off his bronc out by the bull and was winding up his rope. He slung the rope on his horn and waddled toward the chuck wagon, a huge tub of a man in suede *charro* pants and knee-high *mitaja* leggings. He hooked a spoon from the wreck pan and dipped up a taste from the pot by the tail gate. His eyes rolled heavenward.

"What ecstasy! I never like gringo cooking till you come, Larrup. Now I don't ever want to see a *tortilla* again. Look here, Enrique! We got the spotted pup for dessert tonight."

The other Mexican was still sitting his whey-bellied stud. "Untrammeled," he said.

Toro frowned at him. "What?"

Enrique looked surprised. "Perspicacious?" he asked.

Toro shook his head. "No, no."

Enrique looked desperate. "Pyrolisis?"

Toro shrugged helplessly, turning to Larrup. "Enrique, he only know three word in English, but nobody they understand them."

"His ma must have married a dictionary," Rigger told Toro. "You got a quirly?"

"Last time Toro give you some of that Mexican tobacco, you was sick all night," Wrangatang mocked.

Rigger swept a tin plate off the tail gate and flung it at him. Wrangatang ducked, thumbing his nose. Skid was watching Larrup, who had gotten the spade from the wagon.

"What you going to do with that?" the foreman asked.

Larrup was poking around for a soft spot in the ground. "Dig a hole. I promised Toro I'd roast the bull's head."

"Sure, Skid," Toro said. "You wrap the head in grass, fill the hole with hot coals—"

"Let's just have steaks," Skid said.

Toro's mouth sagged open. "You ain't going to throw away the greatest delicacy of all?"

Larrup found a soft spot and sank the spade in, but Skid came at him in a whipping walk. "I said you ain't going to cook it."

Larrup looked up inquiringly. "It's

hard to believe you're telling me how to cook."

Skid grabbed the spade and tore it from his hands. "You ain't roasting any bull's head."

Larrup came to his full height. The quirks were gone from the tips of his mouth. His voice was barely a whisper. "Give me back my spade."

Skid turned to toss it in the chuck wagon. Larrup lunged forward, grabbing it. The foreman tore the spade loose and swung it at Larrup.

Larrup doubled over and drove a fist deep into Skid's belly. The spade passing over his head and the air leaving Skid made the same whistling sound. Skid bent double into Larrup. The cook hit Skid in the face. This straightened the foreman like a reach pole and pitched him over backward. He hit hard and lay still.

"Now," Larrup panted. "I'm going to roast that bull's head if it's the last thing I cook for this outfit."

Larrup got into Eagle Pass about ten that evening. He left the horse he had ridden at the livery stable, where the first Double Crown hand to hit town could pick it up. He found out the stage didn't leave till noon the next day, so he got a room at the Mexican inn on the plaza. He was still so mad he wanted to go back and whip Skid all over again. He'd burned his hand roasting the bull's head, and that didn't help either.

He had left without bothering to get his time from Skid. A man couldn't whip the foreman and still stay on with an outfit. Especially when he didn't want to stay anyway. At least he tried to tell himself he didn't want to. But the picture of Roma Adams kept floating through his mind. And he still couldn't help wondering why Skid had made such a fuss over roasting a bull's head.

Next morning he got up early and had *eggs el rancho* and coffee strong enough to smell in Mexico City, and then wandered down to the river. He sat down on the shelving bank with the willows clattering softly in the wind, still unable to get Charlie and Roma and Skid out of his mind. Mostly Roma. Then a shadow fell across him and he jumped with surprise and looked up to see the girl sitting her fiddle-fotted mare there.

"They told me at the inn you headed toward the river," she said. She stared at him a moment longer, lips parted, and then swung off, ground-hitching her reins. He was on his feet now and she took a step toward him and then stopped self-consciously.

"Oh, Larrup," she said. "Don't go—"

She trailed off and her parted lips and the wistful plea in her eyes gave her a little-girl sweetness that pulled him toward her till they were not inches apart.

"I wish I didn't have to," he said.

She caught his arm, face upturned. "I felt so lost when I heard you'd gone. You're the only one who ever paid any attention to me around there. All the other hands are even afraid to speak with me for fear of making Uncle George mad."

"It's more than that, isn't it?" he asked.

Her eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"You're afraid."

She stared at him a long time before answering. "Yes," she said, with a little catch to her breath. "I guess I am."

"Of what?"

Her curls bobbed with the helpless toss of her head. "I don't know, Larrup."

"Your uncle?"

Surprise lifted her brows. "What makes you say that?"

"Don't try to tell me you like him."

She avoided his eyes. "He's my uncle, Larrup. I shouldn't say anything like that. He's taken care of me—"

"Like your own mother," Larrup said cynically.

"All right—" she shook her head angrily—"so he hasn't been everything he could. It's a big ranch. He's been busy."

"Not too busy to make you do exactly what he wants."

She was near to tears. "Oh, Larrup, let's not talk about him. It isn't only Uncle George. It's everything—Charlie disappearing, the crew so jumpy—"

"I couldn't come back to the outfit now," he said.

"I'll talk with Uncle George," she said. "I'll talk with Skid. Surely they'll—"

"You know they won't," he said.

Her lower lip began to tremble. "You're leaving, then?"

"I didn't say that."

Her voice rose in wild hope. "You're staying, then."

"Do you think I could go away—now?" he asked softly.

"Oh—Larrup—"

Her whole body seemed to lift toward him and it was the most natural thing in the world for him to take her in his arms and kiss her. Afterward he held her against him and felt the trembling of her body. Her face was buried against his shoulder, and it muffled her voice.

"I guess I didn't really know how badly I needed somebody," she said.

"You've got somebody," he told her. "Let's go back to the inn and get my gear. I'll go back to the ranch with you and make a stab at it, anyway. And if they won't sign me on again I'll camp in the brush right outside your window and they won't be able to drag me out with six teams of circle mules."

Her face was radiant as she walked back with him, leading her mare. They came around the inn from the rear and found a buckboard in the plaza with a Double Crown painted on its side. George Adams stepped from the inn door, his face wreathed in that campaign grin.

"Looks like my niece preceded me with the good news," he chuckled.

"What good news?" Roma asked.

"Oh." Adams pursed his lips, and the grin faded. After frowning a moment at the girl, he turned to Larrup. "The hands have quit. They've all got the bellyache from the slop Toro tried to cook. They're sitting down there at the roundup camp and they say they won't work and they won't eat till you come back."

"How about Skid?" Larrup asked.

"Skid is going to apologize."

"What for? Me whipping the tar out of him?"

Adams's chuckle shook his expansive belly. "Did you ever see such a man, Roma? Get your gear, Larrup. I'll even give you a raise."

They took the wagon road cutting north from the river, with Roma's mare hitched to the tail gate and trotting along behind. Before they were out of town, Adams turned to smile benevolently at the girl.

"And how did my little niece happen to be in town so early this morning?"

Her chin lifted defiantly. "I came in for the same thing you did. To get Larrup back."

"Did you now?" Adams's smile broadened without gaining humor. He looked strangely at Larrup. "And you went down to the river to talk it over."

"I was telling her how I got my name," Larrup said.

Adams lost his patience. "I thought you already told her."

"I didn't get to finish."

Adams gathered his good humor with palpable effort. "How did you get your name, Larrup? I mean really."

Larrup gave a hitch to his belt. "It harks back to the days I was cooking for the Corkscrew outfit up in Deaf Smith County. We'd made camp near the edge of a cliff. This hand named Rawlins choused a beef in for me to butcher. When he dabbed his rope on, the beef ran right over the cliff. Rawlins couldn't cut loose and he went with it. Nearest thing at hand was my jug of molasses. I dumped it over the edge, and it was so cold that there larrup froze just as it got to Rawlins. He grabbed it and climbed back up. Saved him from a horrible fate. Ever since, they been calling me Larrup."

Adams guffawed and the horses whinnied and Roma looked up at Larrup with shining eyes. He knew he'd stay on the Double Crown now if he had to whip the foreman every day before breakfast.

They reached the roundup camp in a couple of hours. The whole crew seemed to erupt from the clearing as soon as the rig broke brush.

"Enrique!" Toro bawled. "Larrup, he's back. Now we have spotted pup and son-of-a-gun in a sack. I'll never have to eat that terrible greaser food again."

"Untrammeled," Enrique grinned.

"No, Enrique, please."

"Perspicacious?"

Wrangatang was hanging on the edge of the wagon and bouncing it up and down, Dally ran around doing rope tricks, and Silent Joe Smith sat over by the fire looking mysterious. At last Larrup saw Skid, standing by the chuck wagon, slapping his hat absently against his rawhide leggings. Larrup swung down and Roma started to follow him.

"You take the wagon home, Roma," Adams said. "I'm going to stay and help with roundup for a couple of days."

"You said I could see Larrup," she told him.

"Not today, my dear. Can't you see he'll be too holy busy for little girls?"

She pouted defiantly. "I'm going to stay anyway."

Adams smiled and tucked his chin in. "My dear," he said softly.

She tried to meet his eyes, but at last her gaze dropped. She sent a helpless glance at Larrup, then shook out the reins. Adams turned to the crew, as the wagon rattled away.

"Let's hit the brush, boys," he said. "Today ought to clean up those pastures."

With a great creaking of leather and snorting of animals, they saddled up and lined out into the thickets. Only Adams and Skid were left. The foreman came over to Larrup.

"You don't need to apologize," Larrup said. "I can see it's eating you."

"I didn't stay back to apologize," Skid said. He slapped his hat against his leg. "Where's the book?"

"What book?" Larrup asked.

Adams grinned like a Cheshire. "You didn't think we brought you back cause your cooking was so good, did

you? We couldn't have you running around loose with that book. Just give it to us now and everything will be all right."

"I don't know what you're gabbing about."

Skid put his hat on. "Then we'll try and make it clear—"

The crackle of brush cut him off. Rigger rode into the clearing.

"Forgot my tie ropes," he said.

Adams chuckled hollowly. "Well, now. Skid was just apologizing to Larrup. Weren't you, Skid?"

"Yeah," Skid said. He caught a look from Adams, and went to get his roan and Adams walked over to the horse Wrangatang had roped for him out of the remuda. The two men rode out together.

Absently, Larrup got the molasses jug down and upturned it, trying to unclog the neck. But he couldn't do it. Rigger came around the corner of the wagon carrying his short tie ropes.

"Got a quirly?"

"You forgot. I chaw."

Rigger sighed disconsolately. "Was Skid really apologizing?"

Larrup glanced up sharply to see a quizzical light in the yellow-haired man's eyes. "What's going on, Rigger?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know, but it's something funny. There's something between Roma and her uncle. Looks like she's afraid of him.

"Would it have something to do with Charlie?"

Rigger frowned. "I been thinking on that. Funny how Skid got upset about you digging a hole to roast that bull's head. Charlie was going to roast a bull's head for the Mexicans the day he disappeared."

Larrup and Rigger looked at each other with the same revelation growing in their eyes. Then Larrup turned to get the spade from the chuck wagon.

"I went ahead and roasted the bull's head after I licked Skid," he said, staring around the clearing. "I was mad. I didn't dig the hole as deep as I would otherwise. I found a soft spot over by that coma tree. Like somebody had already dug it up."

"The place Charlie dug to roast his bull's head," Rigger said. "Somebody's filled your hole in too."

Larrup started digging. He had to go deeper than he had dug to roast his bull's head. They uncovered a man's hand. There was a big gold ring with the initials CM engraved on it.

"Charlie Malloy," Rigger said. "That's his ring, all right."

Larrup turned away, sick at his stomach. Then there was a crackling of brush, and Skid and Adams rode into the clearing.

"We figgered that's what was going on when Rigger didn't come back out," Adams said.

Larrup's lips were white around the edges. "Why did you do it?"

"Charlie got hold of the tally book," Adams said. "He threatened to expose us. Skid had to shoot him. The crew was coming in for supper, and we didn't have time to get rid of him any other way. We had to dump him in the hole he'd dug for that bull's head."

"Only we couldn't find the book on him," Skid said. "We figger he hid it somewheres on the chuck wagon. And now Larrup's found it."

"But I ain't—" Larrup protested.

"It don't matter," Adams said. "History repeats itself. You've dug a hole too."

Rigger and Skid and Adams all pulled for their guns at once. Rigger got

his free first and shot Adams off his horse. Skid got Rigger in the leg and Rigger flopped over on his face. Larrup threw his spade at Skid. It hit the ramrod's roan and the horse reared up and pitched Skid off its rump. Skid hit rolling and Larrup saw that he didn't have time to get Rigger's gun. He darted behind the chuck wagon with Skid's first shot eating into the wagon bed a foot behind him. He reached the lowered tail gate and started heaving everything in the wreck pan at the foreman.

With pots and pans and skillets flying all around his head and clanging off his shoulders, Skid didn't have much accuracy. He threw up an arm to ward them off, shouting in that black rage.

"Come on out and fight like a man, damn you."

Larrup found he was out of things to throw. Skid straightened up, blinking his eyes, and started to line up his gun. In desperation, Larrup caught the molasses jug by its long black strap and heaved it. Skid tried to fire and dodge at the same time.

The bullet went wild. The jug met his head and he pitched over backward with broken crockery and black molasses pouring over him, lying still when he hit. Larrup ran out to Rigger, who was holding his leg.

"Forget about me," grunted Rigger. "Look what came out of the jug."

There was a little book, rolled up, lying in the pool of molasses by Skid's head. Larrup went over and got it.

"It's a tally book," he said. "That's why the jug was stopped up. Charlie must have rolled the book up and stuffed it in there."

"Look under June the seventeenth," Rigger said.

Fingers sticky with molasses, Larrup found the page for the seventeenth. "Thirty-one steers and ten heifers and three calves," he said.

"That's way off," Rigger said triumphantly. "I made a count of my own that day. We was all working the same pasture and I tallied off over sixty head. That's what Skid and Adams was doing. Giving a short count every roundup and running the difference across the border. No wonder they wanted the beef book. One look and any of us hands could see how far off the tally was."

Roma swung the wagon into the clearing and pulled up, staring wide-eyed at the carnage. "I was afraid something would happen," she said. "I went slow. Heard the shots—"

Her under lip began to tremble and she dropped out of the wagon and ran into Larrup's arms. He held her tight, telling her everything.

After that they bound up Rigger's leg. His bullet had hit Adams in the shoulder, and the man was just coming round from the shock of that, and of falling from his horse. He tried to bluster, but he was too weak to be very convincing. They did what they could for the wound, and got him in the wagon.

Rigger's eyes lit up as they saw the Bull Durham tag hanging from the man's shirt pocket.

"Wait a minute now," Adams said.

"Don't make me shoot you again," Rigger grinned, pulling the tobacco sack and a book of cigarette papers from the pocket. "I went through a lot for this quirly."

They tied up the still unconscious Skid, and put him in the back with Adams and Rigger. Then they started

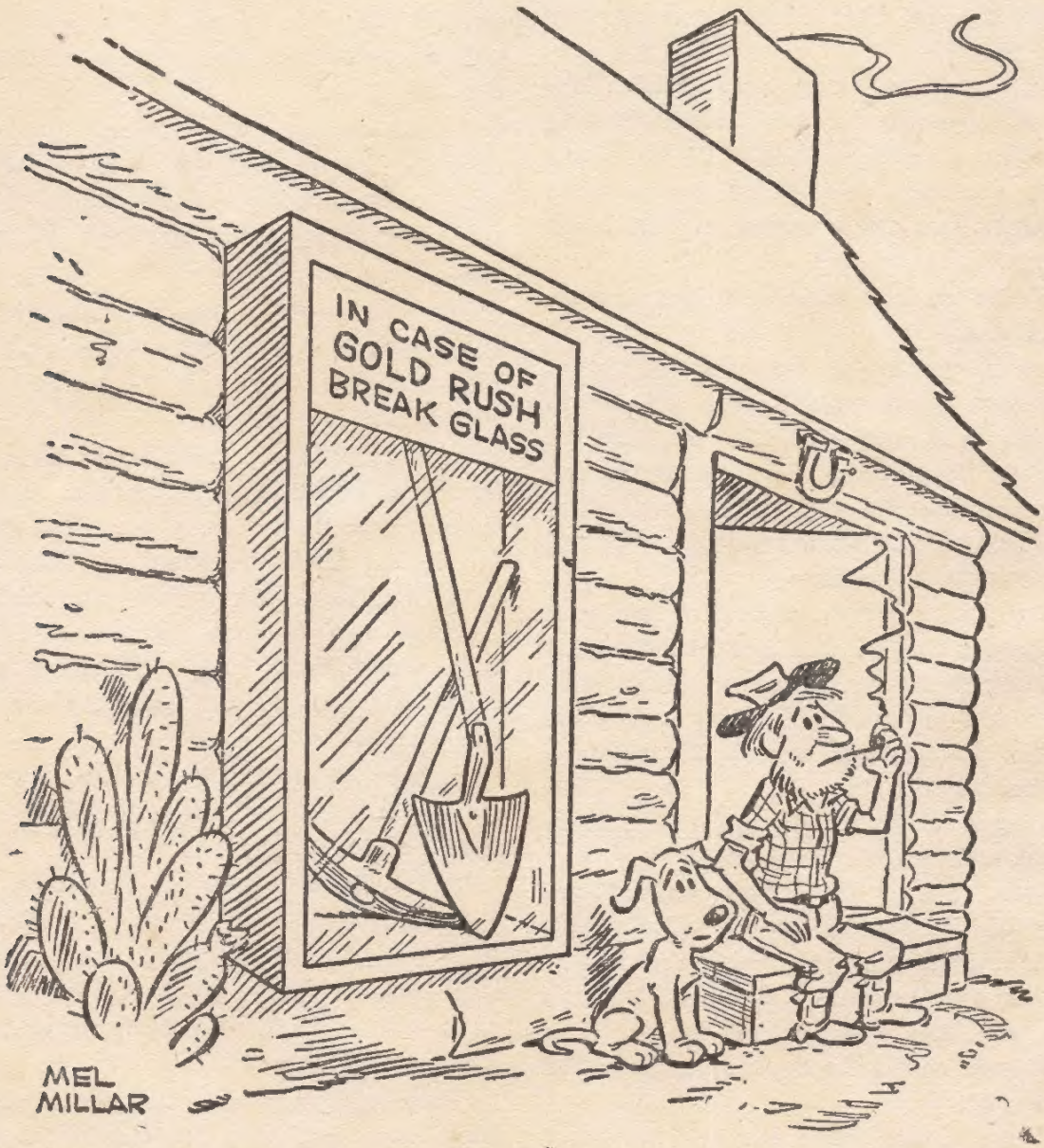
back to the ranch with Roma sitting beside Larrup on the front seat.

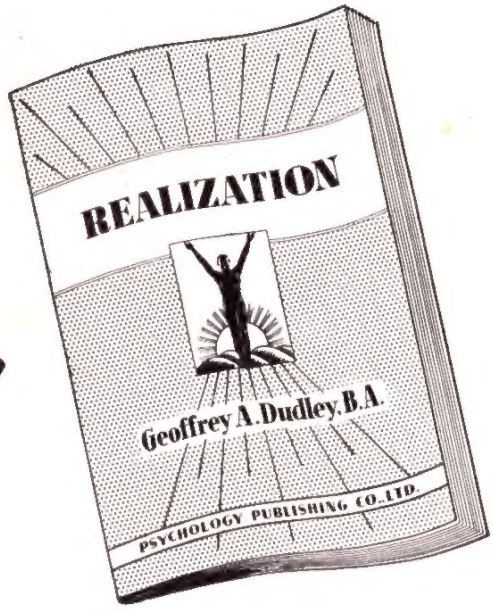
"Looks like you'll need somebody else to take care of you," he said. "How about a man that can cook?"

"If you'll tell me how you really got your name," she said.

"I was cooking for the Double Crown outfit," he said, hitching his belt. "This evil old uncle was swindling his niece out of her cows. The uncle got suspicious that I knew what was up, and set twenty killers on me. All I had to defend myself with was this jug of molasses—"

"I know exactly how it ended," she said, snuggling over against him. "And ever since that day they've called you Larrup."





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(magazine abridgment)

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